



# Using Stories to Promote Children's Mandarin Language Development in Kindergarten

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*On a Thursday morning, I walked into a first-grade Mandarin immersion classroom. When I opened the door, I was shocked by what I saw. Fifteen children of different ethnicities were sitting straight up in their chairs ... with their textbooks and notebooks opened on the table. They kept their [eyes] on their teacher who held her text and stood on the stage. The class was completely silent except for the teacher's lecture. She said in Mandarin, "Eyes", while pointing at the Chinese word on the board. The children repeated her. Afterwards, the teacher asked them to read Chinese words and phrases in their text and to write them down in their notes. All of sudden, one child [said], "Teacher, I want to..." The teacher interrupted the child coldly, "Are you allowed to talk in class?" Looking at his book, the child apologized.*

*(Field notes, April 24, 2005)*

From my experience as a teacher in the classroom, I realize that teachers are an important vehicle for promoting young children's second language learning. After I observed the Mandarin immersion class described in my observational notes above, my first thought was how strict, disciplined, and boring the class was, similar to my childhood English class in Taiwan. The teacher used the traditional approach to teach Mandarin: focusing on phonological units (i.e., phonemes), grammatical units (e.g., particles), and lexical items (e.g., structuring words) through texts and worksheets (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Consequently, the verbal interactions between the teacher and the children were very limited.

In making my transition from observer back to teacher in a Mandarin immersion kindergarten classroom, I feel this experience increased my interest in learning how to provide children who are learning a second language a more interesting and natural learning environment. One key way I have found to do this is through the use of storytelling in the curriculum.

## Action Research

This study is a teacher-developed action research project designed to assist me in gaining insights into my teaching and learning. Stremmel (2002) states, “Teacher research provides an insider perspective that allows teachers to address the important question: What does teaching mean?” (p. 66). As a Mandarin immersion teacher and an English learner, I have seen that teachers face significant challenges getting young children to speak their second language in class. Thus, my main goal with this project was to examine the value of storytelling and the role teachers play in children’s Mandarin proficiency development. I wanted to investigate how children acquire Mandarin through storytelling and how teachers maintain supportive communication and relationships with children.

## Mandarin Immersion in Kindergarten

This research project was conducted in a kindergarten classroom at the Chinese American International School, a partial Mandarin immersion program located in San Francisco, California. The preK-8 school seeks to develop bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural students through immersion education. There are three kindergarten classes in the school with 16 to 17 children between the ages of five and six in each class. Each kindergartener spends half of the day learning through English and half of the day learning through Mandarin Chinese. The two teachers, Teacher Zhu and I, are native speakers of Mandarin.

During the Mandarin part of the day, the children are able to learn in an environment in which Mandarin is introduced in a natural and rhythmic way through different large and small group activities that teachers create. Kindergarten teachers work collaboratively to set up the classroom schedule including circle time, free choice time, and small group time. They also establish different work centers in the classroom such as language, art, blocks, kitchen, math, and science. The immersion model allows children to spend at least half of their class time learning subject content in Mandarin in the areas of Language, Mathematics, Social Studies, Science, Music and Art.

A number of teacher-directed activities are provided in the one-way immersion classroom since teachers must act as models of the target language. However, children can choose hands-on learning materials to develop their creativity, social skills, and imagination during free choice time. In the following sections, I will present what I came to understand about important elements in storytelling activity design as a teacher participant observer. First, I discuss storytelling activities that take place in whole group settings with teacher guidance. Then I describe my observations of follow-up storytelling activities that children engage in either independently or in small groups.

## Teacher-directed Storytelling Activities

At the beginning of my teacher research project, the children's Mandarin proficiency was at different levels. Some kindergarten children did not have any background in speaking Mandarin; some had very basic Mandarin skills; some attempted to produce more sophisticated phrases and sentences in Mandarin. Teacher Zhu and I developed a series of group storytelling and retelling story activities to help the children use their expanding knowledge of Mandarin. The group storytelling activities included book reading, group conversations, and story retelling through dramatization.



*Teacher Zhu sits with her Kindergarten children during group conversation time.*

For storytelling activities to achieve maximum potential in developing children's oral language base, a good collection of books is very important (Meier, 2004). While selecting books for the children, Teacher Zhu and I considered their Mandarin development and their interests. We chose book content that included familiar characters (e.g., animals and family members), used repetitive sentences and phrases, and had simple plots. For instance, while introducing animals, I read *Good Friends*, which is a story about animals (a cat, rabbit, fox, bear, and elephant) playing together. Unlike other teachers who read storybooks,

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I talked stories through the book by using Mandarin only with the support of gestures and pictures, so that the children would understand (Tabors, 1997). While telling the story, I emphasized character description and the story sequence depending on who and what the children already knew. I pointed to each character and adapted the sound of my voice from that of a storyteller to that of various characters. Point-and-say appeared to be an effective method to introduce characters and objects in the story to the children because they were able to match the words I pronounced to the ones I pointed to. Some children said each character in Mandarin loudly and clearly while closely following my finger pointing. In addition, the use of eye contact, facial expression, gestures, movement, and intonation helped me draw the children into the story and made my storytelling more interesting (Isbell, 2002). The children appeared to be engaged by my storytelling. Some children laughed and kept contact with me, some imitated my actions and intonation, and others even filled in the repetitive phrases and sentences I used in the story much to their delight. For example, I would say in Mandarin, “An elephant came, and it wanted to play with the other animals. He asked “\_\_\_\_\_?” Some children would smile and respond quickly, “我可不可以跟你們一起玩? (May I play with you?)”

After a few months of school, we started to up the ante, insisting that second-language-learning children use the Mandarin language to get their points across during group conversations (Tabors, 1997, p.103). However, we shared our personal anecdotes with the children first in an effort to reduce their anxiety about speaking Mandarin in a group. For example, Teacher Zhu shared about having Japanese food with her family on the weekend. While she narrated her story, the children kept their eyes on her and paid particular attention to her. Sharing her personal story allowed Teacher Zhu to interact with the children on a personal level, and let them see that their teacher is a real person, like them, who ate Japanese food and had a family. Because of this relationship, the children appeared more comfortable with the conversational storytelling in Mandarin. They laughed aloud and raised their hands to share their personal stories in class. For example, Peter, who typically was quiet and shy in a large group, shared about moon watching with his family, while making use of both Mandarin and English. In brief, these whole group conversations offered the children an opportunity to tell their stories in Mandarin, even though their storytelling and Mandarin skills were still just developing.

As the school year continued, since the children had had many experiences doing storytelling activities with Teacher Zhu and me, we felt that the children were ready to retell stories they already knew. The common story retelling activity was dramatization. The stories Teacher Zhu chose used familiar characters, repetitive phrases, and simple events, so the children were able to recall the sequence of events and use the new Mandarin vocabulary while acting out the story. In one

example, Teacher Zhu read a storybook, *Where are My Balloons?*. In the story, four children hold different colored balloons—red, blue, white, and green—as they walk into the park. Suddenly, a strong wind comes and blows all the balloons away. While looking at the sky, the children sigh and say, “Oh, the balloons flew away.” After Teacher Zhu chose the four student actors using colored balloons, the children reenacted the story. The children supported each other through the dramatization. If one child was unable to recall a detail of the story, the others helped out. Through Teacher Zhu’s encouragement and the support of their peers, the children were not afraid of speaking Mandarin aloud in front of the classroom audience. Furthermore, they assisted one another to get across their understanding of the story and successfully perform the play.

## Follow-up Storytelling Activities

As I mentioned previously, many teacher-directed group activities are used in the classroom since kindergarten Mandarin immersion teachers serve as important language models. However, it is also vital for the children to play with their peers in class and have opportunities to produce Mandarin words and phrases with each other. Jones and Reynolds (1992) state, “Young children learn the most important things not by being told but by constructing knowledge for themselves in interaction with the physical world and with other children; the way they do this is by playing” (p.1). Indeed, play is the common sociocultural activity during which children make and keep friends in their communities. They learn to coordinate their behaviors and negotiate with their peers through play. Most importantly, they are led to higher levels of intellectual development through peers’ scaffolding (Engel, 1999).

Following whole group storytelling experiences, Teacher Zhu and I made use of small group and individual or peer storytelling activities that provided more opportunities for the children to continue their storytelling and Mandarin development through interactions with us, their teachers and classmates. These activities included dramatic play and story dictation. Unlike teacher-directed storytelling activities (e.g., practicing through repetition and recalling the Mandarin phrases that surfaced in the story), children had options to reconstruct stories alone or with their peers. During the children’s play, Teacher Zhu and I either observed their engagement or participated in their play.

## Dramatic Play

In our class the children often engaged in dramatic play in the kitchen area where we provided sufficient child-sized materials. Some children spent most of their free choice time in this area, and, interestingly, they sometimes asked Teacher Zhu and me to participate in their play. For

instance, a group of four girls invited me into their family play on a Tuesday afternoon. After discussing amongst themselves, they assigned me the role of grandmother who was visiting four poor sisters who had recently lost their parents. During the play, the girls created a story in which they attempted to escape from a terrible person who had killed their parents. After their escape, the girls fled to Lake Tahoe. Interestingly, when they communicated with each other in their play they used English only. They instantly switched their language from English to Mandarin, however, to communicate with me. It seemed that the girls spoke English as the common language through which to communicate their ideas, coordinate their efforts and keep their play going (Rogoff, 2003). In contrast, the girls spoke Mandarin as a communicative tool between them and me.

Following the children's lead was not easy for me because, as an adult, I am used to having the authority and leading the children to achieve what I expect. Since I was a player in the family game, I followed the children's lead, listened to their conversations and observed the problem-solving strategies they used independently. I learned that the children were the masters of their play. Without adult assistance, the girls used their oral language skills to negotiate with their peers to decide which roles we should enact and what would happen next in the following play (Engel, 1999). Moreover, the girls seemed more comfortable and flexible using their developing Mandarin with me in this creative play setting than at other times.

### **Arts and Crafts**

In addition to dramatic play, I also paid attention to the children who spent a lot of free choice time drawing alone or doing arts and crafts with peers in the Art area. During structured classroom activities we exposed children to Chinese written characters with a focus on character recognition. Not surprisingly, I observed some children attempting to write Chinese characters in their pictures. For example, Teacher Zhu introduced the theme topic of Fall by reading a book about autumn leaves and asking the children to bring leaves of different colors from home. We put these leaves and some art materials in the Art area to encourage the children to make use of them in their arts and crafts. During free choice time, six-year-old Alan used different leaves he had brought from home to make a piece of art on his own. Upon completion Alan named his art work 秋天的樹葉 ("The Fall Leaves") with the help of Teacher Zhu. Then Alan and I co-created a story about "The Fall Leaves." In the story, different colored leaves drop from the tree during the season of fall. Once on the ground, worms find the leaves. Some worms play with leaves, some sleep on leaves, still others play with water. During our interaction, Alan told me his story in Mandarin or by using code-mixing, mixing two languages in a sentence. I listened

and wrote his narratives down on his pictures. Alan appeared excited to see his story written down in Mandarin and to hear his story read aloud by me because he kept his eyes on my handwriting and repeated each sentence I spoke to him. Engaging with him in the process of story dictation helped me understand how Alan built his knowledge of connections between oral and written language. According to Meier (2004), "...[Dictation] encourages children to use their considerable oral language talents and connects to their drawing and art (p.113)... dictation can be used to promote bilingualism and biliteracy" (p.118). I also found that dictation was beneficial for children's developing understanding of the link between oral and written language.

## Conclusion

Henderson, Meier and Perry (2004) assert, "Through teacher research teachers have an opportunity to shape their professional development and to validate, affirm, and improve their practice" (p. 95). In this teacher research project, I recognized the importance of the myriad roles teachers play. I have learned to collaborate more effectively with my master teacher, Teacher Zhu, to provide a low-stress and interesting Mandarin kindergarten by implementing storytelling activities in a classroom where most children are second language learners. Through a series of teacher-directed group storytelling activities during circle time, I saw evidence that each child has a different Mandarin learning path. For example, during the activities, some children attempted to produce more advanced Mandarin; some used one-word statements in Mandarin; some became silent and shy when asked to speak Mandarin in a group. This range of language learning behaviors is to be expected.

In addition, after observing and participating in children's play, I noticed that the children enjoyed speaking Mandarin to their peers and me because in this familiar context they did not seem to have any fear. In play, the children treated me as their play partner, not their Mandarin teacher. Consequently, they made an effort to communicate with me in Mandarin to convey our stories. Because of these new experiences, I am more aware of the important role I have as a co-player who offers these kindergarteners a low-stress Mandarin-learning environment.

Listening to the children's laughter, looking at their smiles, and experiencing their active interactions in play, I feel assured that they enjoy learning Mandarin and engaging in the new experiences we make available to them in the immersion classroom. I look forward to providing future learners curricular experiences that include storytelling activities based on teacher direction and children's interests, and to continuing to integrate existing theories and practices while developing an immersion teaching style of my own.

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