

Children's Literature through Performance

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Abstract Educational theory often points out that in order to improve the effectiveness of teaching, the teacher has to allow students to take the initiative and actively participate in the learning process. Therefore, in the four traditional teaching methods, “speaking” and “writing,” compared to “reading” and “listening,” reap greater teaching effectiveness. This paper suggests that if the teacher combines “performance” with listening, speaking, reading and writing, and also adds various other forms of participation to his/her teaching, the teaching results will be much better than the traditional four methods. Take “children’s literature” in this study as an example. Students are required to take the text as the basis for adaptation and performance. The results show that although the students originally were difficult to understand the passages through reading, through a variety of performances during the “implementation” of the practice, they have been able to slowly read into the text and see the meaning. Dewey’s “learning by doing” theory is thus proved.

Keywords Children's Literature, Teaching Method, Practice, Performance

1. Introduction

There are four elements in English teaching, namely listening, reading, speaking and writing. In general, almost every teacher inevitably uses the first two methods: students have to listen to the teacher’s lectures, and there are required textbooks to read. However, for the latter two methods, speaking and writing, this may not be the case. Although some teachers require students to talk, or discuss, converse, etc., many teachers will not make such a demand except certain types of courses such as oral training. Besides written exams, some teachers do not require students to write reading observations or reports for writing classes. Overall, at least in the teaching and learning environment in Taiwan, with respect to speaking and writing, listening and reading seem to play a more important role.

However, according to the nature of teaching,

listening/reading on the one hand, and speaking/writing on the other, is two very different teaching methods. Listening is a very traditional teaching method where students listen to the teacher, so students are in a passive position. The teaching effect of such a method is not necessarily good. Reading is basically the same. If students are not required to write reading observations, their average reading is very inattentive, and they are less likely to be actively involved. On the other hand, speaking and writing are a completely different category as opposed to reading and writing. Students play a much more active role in terms of the teacher's lectures and reading materials: they can criticize or have a dialogue with the authors, read the texts repeatedly to write good responses, or interpret the text with their brilliant ideas independently. In other words, these active activities have the best teaching results. Therefore, nowadays, teachers have gradually added speaking and writing to the traditional elements of listening and reading.

The present study points out that, however, to make students actively join the learning process to achieve maximum effect, there is a more active approach than speaking and writing: it is implementation (practice), and in this paper, implementation means dramatic performance. In teaching a literary work, implementation means acting or performance that synthesizes all four skills with other elements such as action, production (props), etc., making a more comprehensive, integrated teaching method. In the implementation process, in addition to students' listening of the teacher’s lectures, students have to learn to write the script, and in order to write the script, students must carefully read the work. Finally, it’s time for the performance, i.e., the more sublime version of speaking. The separate, independent elements in the past learning process are all integrated together in the performance stage. Moreover, after the performance, students, because of the genuine performing experience, will have a deeper, more detailed understanding of the implications of the work that cannot be obtained purely through listening, reading, or any other conventional teaching methods.

In this study, I will use children's literature as an example, and I’ll explain how to teach children’s literary works through performance. First of all, students are

divided into three or four groups; each group select their favorite episode(s) then rewrite it/them as a script. They are also asked to create simple props, costumes, and there should also be background music. Students should also put on makeup. They will then perform in front of the class. Beneath, I will report on these hands-on experiences, and analyze the effectiveness of this teaching. But before empirical analysis, let me first write a simple literature review of performance and education, as well as the characteristics of children's literature.

2. Literature Review

Dewey [1] has had wonderful exposition on the relationship between education and art. He believes that a good education is to allow students to get experience of education, and students' art participation is an important way to get a good experience; therefore, art is a very important educational medium. For Dewey, an art experience is "an action and undergoing process." Take appreciating works of art for example. If a piece of art quietly hangs on the wall of the living room, it can hardly produce aesthetic effects. Similarly, it is difficult to achieve good educational results if an authoritative teacher endlessly lectures on the stage. According to Dewey, a person must be actively involved in the works of art inside to produce educational effects. Through continuous discussions, s/he will slowly immerse into the artwork, and form a dynamic participatory relationship with the artwork, and then s/he is able to derive meanings from such an experience.

Katherine Burkeman [2] applied Dewey's theories on art and experience to the field of education. She and several other teachers came together to form a performance team with Shakespeare's plays as the backbone, wrote a stage play -*Shakespeare's Mirror*, and performed it in public. The purpose of the play is to educate, and through the simulation of Shakespeare's plays, the audience can understand Shakespeare through the art experience.

Nonetheless, Burkeman found that when they wrote the script, they wandered to and fro in the various plots of Shakespeare's plays, and thus found as well as understood many delicate and profound parts of the script that they did not notice before. Just as Dewey said, only by delving into art, and through constituting a dynamic relationship with art, can the aesthetics of art become highlighted? In addition, in preparation for their props, costumes, or sound effects, they also came to another level of understanding of the play. Finally, when they interacted with the audience, a lot of new interpretations of Shakespeare again appeared. After the performance, the group's understanding of Shakespeare and theater experience differed greatly from their previous performances.

After Burkeman made *Shakespeare's Mirror*, she continued to produce *A Canterbury Caper*, which received

the same success. Subsequently, many teachers used this approach in teaching with very good teaching effects. On the basis of the above studies, the present author tries to enhance the effects of teaching children's literature with such a theatrical performance approach. In my opinion, besides the implementation/performance method applied to the teaching of children's literature, there is a close relationship between children's literature and performance: in general, performing children's literature in the classroom has produced better effects than a traditional literature class. This is mainly because children understand the world with "senses" [3]. Thus, performance is more attractive to their attention than reading, or any other kind of conventional teaching methods.

Children usually have to understand the story of the book through the senses that include sight, hearing, smell, taste, movement. They like illustrations or photos more than texts. In fact, when they set their eyes on a story book, what come to their minds are concrete visual images. They also like the sound. When they are reading by themselves, they sometimes will read aloud because through their voice, they seem to better understand the meaning of the text. Certainly, their favorite part is when adults "read" to them, especially when adults create various sounds--- including the sounds of wind, rain, animals, or talking voice. As for the sense of taste, it is even more obvious. A lot of young children like biting the book; the book seems to be edible. Children's literature expert Wolf and Heath [3] pointed out that children's favorite story books are covered with teeth marks. Such an example aptly proves that children are used to understand the story through senses. Therefore, if we adapt children's literature into the script, children will definitely pay more attention to the works based on what child experts have observed.

3. The Requirements

Over the years of my teaching career, I have offered Children's Literature class a number of times. The texts I have used, to quote a few examples, are as follows: J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Beverly Cleary's *Dear Mr. Henshaw*, Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, *James and the Giant Peach*, *Charlie and the Great Chocolate Factory*, C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*; Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, and E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. At first, I used the traditional way of teaching, namely, asking students to read the weekly reading assignments, I gave lectures, and then there were discussions. The students' responses were lukewarm.

I wasn't satisfied with the continuous lukewarm attitudes of students, especially since I have always associated children's literature with imagination, creativity, positive values, and warm feelings, among others. Furthermore, it should also allow the reader to visualize its

content, while also being full of action. In other words, it should be comprehensive enough to appeal to the senses as well as the soul. With these positive attributes in mind, I began to be more concerned about the listless reading and explanation of the text. I asked repeatedly if students could actually feel/sense what they were reading, yet to no avail. I also tried to design various types of assignments for the students, writing chapter summaries, composing limericks, converting descriptions into drawings, watching film adaptations on YouTube, etc. As can be expected, only when I played them the film adaptation of a certain text, did they show high interest in the text. Watching YouTube would arouse their interest, it merely lasted for a couple of hours. Students were still not so much engaged in class.

After pondering for a long time, I somewhat thought of Dewey's concept that education is a matter of an "undergoing process." In addition, it was a known fact that our students were quite fond of acting, considering they have had the departmental drama contest, and annual graduation drama performance for years. And in recent years, they have even been writing their own scripts for the annual graduation performance. Once such an idea came to me, I began to conceive the requirements for the students' performance of the adaptation of the story read in class. I broke down the requirements into several elements: the script, costumes, make-up, props, music, and above all, creativity. What follows is the delineation of my requirements:

The dramatic performance is approximately 15-20 minutes; however, the students are given 15 minutes before the performance to prepare. So each group has about 30-35 minutes in total. Students are required to have a brief introduction about the play in the beginning of the performance, and at the end of the performance, they should introduce the cast. The grade of each group is based on: proficiency of the entire performance, the entertainment quality of the performance, quality of the adapted script, and creativity shown in the script and design of the costumes, props, and music. I'll particularly have a few words to say about the latter two requirements.

First of all, with regard to the adapted script, students must have their own insight. After close reading of the text, including its context, plot, character analysis, symbols, and themes, students should have some insightful understanding of the text, as well as their favorite characters, plots, episodes which could become the basic materials to write the script. They are told they can make all kinds of combination of the plots and episodes; they can even change the ending of the original work. Regarding the characters in the play, they can actually do the same thing as they do to the script; i.e., modifying their genders, personalities...whenever necessary. As for the props, students are asked to use a minimum budget to achieve maximum effects. They are encouraged to take advantage of everyday commodities to design props. I'll talk about some of the amazing results in the next section.

Students undoubtedly have to design their own costumes. Again, they should be creative and spend the least money on the costumes. For example, they may search the closet at home to find clothes suitable for the various roles. The same set of principles also applies to their makeup. They need to envision first the appearances of the characters, either from the illustrations, or from the author's description, then they can go ahead to design the costumes and makeup for the actors.

Students who are music lovers or talented in music can also make the most of their musical expertise in preparing for the play. They can find the most befitting music from a wide Internet repertoire. Of course, it is also very convenient nowadays for them to surf the Internet for a variety of sounds such as animal sounds, school bell's ringing, door slamming, canned laughter, the sound of war drums on the battlefield, and rusty car doors, etc.

4. The Performance

When it came to the actual performance, it was amazing to see the stunning results of the performances put together in such a short period of time, meeting all the above-mentioned requirements. Below, I will describe the performance process of two books—Roald Dahl's *Matilda* [5] and E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web* [6]. These two books are the most popular among students, and almost every year there are students who give performances based on these two novels.

1. *Matilda*: Normally, each group combines several episodes together to compose their script, and the best thing is that they develop the play entirely with dialogues. It means at least they have to digest the text first, then transform it into meaningful conversations to show the plot development. Among the 21 chapters of *Matilda*, their favorite chapters are the ones that involve the bullying headmaster, Ms. Trunchbull, the selfish, abusing Wormwoods, and most of all, the tender and loving teacher, Miss Honey. Almost all the scripts faithfully follow the storyline, the witty, brave Matilda and her mean pranks, Miss Honey's pitiful upbringing, the Trunchbull's horrifying behavior toward children, and the Woodworms' incredibly unloving parenting style. Perhaps because these incidents are more absurdly hilarious, thus more entertaining, and grab the audience's attention more.

Students in particular love to represent the classroom scenes where a ferocious Trunchbull taunts, curses, and spansks the timid and shivering children. They love to design her costume with loud and bright colors. Over the years, whoever plays her has to put on not only the vulgar costume, but also the most exaggerating makeup one can imagine, especially the big, scarlet red mouth. She either holds a belt or short bamboo stick while she strides into the classroom, weaving it and yelling at students.

I must say props and backdrop designs are the most

exciting and creative parts of their performances. In the first place, they use extensively computer graphics/photos to design the stage backdrops. With regard to the *Matilda* performance, they use the Internet photos of a library, a living room, a classroom, the chokey (the setting from the film) for various scenes. One scene that has impressed me most is from "The Third Miracle" episode. In this episode, Matilda conceives of a plan to help Miss Honey, taking back her property. Using computer graphics, the students projected the image of a flying chalk writing some words on the screen, with some eerie sound effects too. They also make full use of the classroom podium, tables and chairs, and combine all these real life items/props with computer graphics on the screen, creating a perfect stage in the classroom. One of the groups has exerted their creativity on the script: they changed the ending of the story, the Wormwoods showing their regret, saying sorry to Matilda, and hugging her to say good bye. This change makes the happy ending even happier, and more humane too.

This year's performances were particularly creative. The students made dramatic revisions to the endings of their scripts. After experiencing the third miracle, Trunchbull was found dead in a corner of the campus, creating a sensation for many teachers and classmates to gather around. Lavender, a student who has been bullied by Trunchbull, said, "I hated her! She terrorized everyone... I..." Before she could even finish her sentence, a chalk appeared to hover in front of the classroom, (held by a ghost that was played by a student wearing a black costume and black hat), writing messages on the blackboard:

You murdered me. Give me what was mine. Give me what is mine. Or I will get you. I will get you like you got me. And that is a promise!

While the ghost was writing on the blackboard, the bottle on the table was overturned, and Miss Honey saw the scene. She panicked and fell to the ground, muttering, "It can't be..."

2. *Charlotte's Web*: Unlike *Matilda*, the performance of *Charlotte's Web* doesn't usually emphasize the technical effects of costumes, props, sound effects, makeup, etc., but rather focuses on the emotional expressions of selective plots. One of the two most frequently staged performances was that the old sheep told Wilbur the bad news that on the arrival of Christmas, he would be slaughtered by the owner, and Charlotte tried to rescue Wilbur. By weaving words such as "SOME PIG," "TERRIFIC," and "RADIANT," Charlotte led people to mistake Wilbur as a sacred pig. Therefore, the owner decided to let Wilbur participate in a pig competition. However, the day of the match happened to be Charlotte's spawning period so she could not attend. After hearing the news, Wilbur was very disappointed and even panicked. He was worried that without Charlotte to help, there would be no miracles at all. In order to reassure Wilbur, Charlotte decided to accompany him to the scene. After hearing this, Wilbur sighed with relief: "I knew you

wouldn't forsake me just when I need you most." Every time when students played this touching moment, they tried hard to act out what Wilbur was experiencing.

Another favorite plot segment is about the friendship between Charlotte and Wilbur in helping each other on the day of the Pig Race. Charlotte was extremely weak after spawning, but when she knew that another pig, Uncle, had been named champion, and Wilbur seemed to have been insulated from the championship, she immediately weaved the word "HUMBLE" and once again made Wilbur show his miracle. Wilbur thus received a special award. However, at that time, Charlotte had already died from fatigue due to overworking. Wilbur then asked the mouse to remove Charlotte's sac from the ceiling and promised to let the mouse eat first at every meal in exchange. After Wilbur had painstakingly taken Charlotte's sac home, her children were finally born the following spring. Three of them stayed, Wilbur took care of them, and lived together with them happily and peacefully. Every time when students performed this episode, they emphasized that, although Charlotte was exhausted, she still worked hard and died for her friend. In return, Wilbur was willing to give the best part of his meal to the mouse, just letting Charlotte's children go home safely.

5. Research Design

For several years, I have been teaching the course English Children's Literature, and I have let the students partake in theatrical adaptations each year. After the performance, I engage in discussions with the whole class, and sometimes interview the performers. These conversations form the basis for the data below. Among these data, about 8 cases are relevant to this study, numbered A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6, A7, A8 respectively. In addition to these cases accumulated in the past, this year I specially made a semi-structured questionnaire sent to the students for questioning. As a result, a total of six students returned the questionnaires, numbered B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, and B6 respectively. In addition to the questionnaires, I also discussed the performances with the students in the class according to the content of this questionnaire. There were four students whose opinions were most related to this study, numbered C1, C2, C3, C4 respectively. The discussion of the results in the following section is based on the analysis of the feedback from the above-mentioned 18 students.

Questionnaire

1. After a few weeks of rehearsing, do you have more understanding about the text? Please specify the paragraph or section of the plot which you did not understand in the past, but after this drill, you have

come to understand better. Explain why you were able to understand the text after the performance: is it because you read the text repeatedly, or because you went through the process of writing a script, or because you went through the simulation process for the role performed? Or other reasons?

2. After this rehearsal, do you have more understanding of the role you are playing? Please give a specific example that gives you a deeper understanding of the role you have played. Do you think the acting of this character exerts some influence on your personality or character? If so, please explain.
3. Have you modified the script many times? What is the major reason for you to decide the final version? Which specific conversation, which word, or which plot arrangement you like the most? If you wrote the script, or if everyone wrote the script together as a joint effort, please describe your feelings about writing this script.
4. If you are the director, or if everyone jointly directed the play, please tell us which part you are most proud of. Also, do you think it is fun to be a director?
5. In the process of rehearsing, did the overall process of coordinating music, props and costumes give you more understanding about the plot? Please specify which specific mechanism (music, costumes, props, or a combination among many factors) provided you with a greater understanding.
6. Overall, during the entire performance, which episode or line was the most impressive? Please explain why you were moved.
7. In general, do you like children's literature more through this performance? Why? What do you think are the characteristics of children's literature compared to general literature?

6. Findings

For the performance of *Charlotte's Web*, the two most popular episodes are as described above. However, even if the script is completely based on the original plot, the students have to read the text repeatedly before they can write a theatrical adaptation. As B1 indicates:

My English is not good at all. Although I read the text during the class, and I also heard the teacher explain it; however, I only grasped a vague outline, and it was impossible for me to write the script. It was not until I read it again and again that I realized that the most important thing about this book was to express the friendship between Charlotte and Wilbur. The way this friendship is expressed is that when the other party needs help most, you should stretch out your helping hands in time.

Another script writer, A1, said that when writing a script, you must personally feel moved by a certain topic

before you can write a touching plot. In order to feel moved, it is necessary to put yourself inside the story to understand the dialogue and integrate yourself into the plot to grasp the author's implications. Take reading *Charlotte's Web* as an example. When Charlotte told Wilbur that she could not go to the fair because of her expected date, Wilbur was almost desperate. Charlotte was worried that Wilbur could not win the contest and may not be able to survive, and so decided to risk her life to save him. She cheered Wilbur to the game, and Wilbur was relieved as if he had seen hope again. It was at this moment that Wilbur said something very touching - "I knew you wouldn't forsake me just when I need you most." [6] It's one of the most exciting conversations in the whole book, defining the meaning of friendship in a very deep and delicate way. That was why we particularly emphasized this plot and used it as the ending, letting Charlotte and Wilbur hug each other to the end.

In fact, the whole story ends with this line, and the story ends in the embrace of Wilbur and Charlotte. This arrangement was jointly conceived by A2, A3, and A4. In the repeated discussion among the members of their group, the three students thought this line made a wonderful interpretation of the friendship, so they regarded it as the core statement of the whole story, and made it the ending of their script. A2, A3, and A4 also unanimously pointed out that creativity is generated in the process of teamwork, and the performance gave everyone the opportunity to cooperate, so that everyone's creativity can be played, and everyone can understand each other better and understand human nature more. To achieve this, it is impossible to read the text yourself. When playing on the plot, A5 spent a lot of time trying to figure out Wilbur's mood. He said that after this simulation and performance, he came to understand human despair and the significance of friendship.

Another writer, A6, said that when writing a script, you should carefully study the original work, and pay special attention to each of the tiny details in order to grasp what the author meant to convey. She said that these details may be very insignificant, yet subtle, and are easily ignored by unattended reading. Therefore, only through intensive reading can we appreciate the author's unsaid meanings. Taking her reading of *Charlotte's Web* as an example, A6 was particularly touched by the plot of Charlotte's death. She said:

When Wilbur was shoved into the crate by the owner and ready to go home, he was very upset, and winked to say "Goodbye" to Charlotte. Charlotte painfully put forward one of her front legs to moan a "Goodbye," and then quietly passed away. At this moment, the author offered an earnest epigram: "No one was with her when she died." This aphorism became the main theme of my script."

"No one was with her when she died" – it may often be the case that this short sentence fails to leave a strong

impression for the reader. It deeply shocked A6, however. She said: "The author is protesting against the ignorance and ruthlessness of human beings. They never understand the emotions between animals and even arbitrarily manipulate animals, which makes the friendship between Charlotte and Wilbur end in such a sad way." A6 also pointed out that after she emphasized the importance of this sentence, her point resonated with A7 and A8, and the three, together, decided to make Charlotte's death the ending of their script and use Mozart's "Requiem" for background music, in order to emphasize the sadness. The death adds a solemn flavor to the story, and can be regarded as a silent protest against humanity. In addition, its directing and music arrangement made the meaning of the performance and the effect of the show very different from the happy ending of the original work.

For Matilda the miracles and the appearance of the three big bad guys, Trunchbull and Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood, gives the performers much room for imagination. Therefore, when the students performed the play, they always used a lot of media techniques to present miracles. They also used bright costumes, props, makeup and other techniques, as well as exaggerated acting to present these bad guys. All these expressions were the ideas of the students, and they were also results of joint discussion before the performance.

This year's students gave a very different theatrical interpretation of Matilda. Trunchbull finally died, but the cause of death was not clearly explained. The script only said that she was suspected of having a heart attack and found dead in a certain corner of the campus. Many teachers and students were watching, nervously, and overwhelmed, and suddenly a chalk floating in the air appeared. The actor who was responsible for writing was dressed in black, with a black headband, and jumped on the stage lightly. Downstage, another actor worked with him and read out loud every word he wrote on the blackboard: "You murdered me. Give me back what was mine ...And it is a promise." At this time, the gloomy music slowly flowed out, and the stage was quiet and even a bit scary. It seemed that the ghost of Miss Honey's father really came back, and Trunchbull seemed to be scared to death by the ghost. This plot is a bit frightening, but the effect of clothing and music has greatly enhanced the mysterious and strange atmosphere of the script. B4, the scriptwriter, said she was very grateful to the design of the music and costumes, so that her script could be presented more brilliantly in front of her classmates.

B4 likes literature very much, and her ability to master words is also very strong. This time, she volunteered to write a script, and it did not seem very difficult for her. However, she recalls that in order to write this script, she read the text repeatedly, trying to find out the author's deeper intentions that might not be clearly enunciated. Finally, she succeeded. She said: "The biggest revelation of the book *Malted* lies in that emotional power has the

potential to be transformed into witchcraft energy. When Matilda is angry, her eyes are full of energy which has made the chalk automatically write on the blackboard. This is the power of emotion. My script was written based on this inspiration. But, what kind of emotional power was it, or who killed Trunchbull? B4 wanted to keep these inquires mysterious; she just said, "This is a secret."

There was a lot of discussion in the class about their version which differs greatly from the original. C1 believed that this ending is very violent, and children's literature should not contain such violence. C2 said that if he were to write the script, he would let Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood repent and apologize to Matilda and the family would reunite and live happily ever after. C3 said she wanted to turn Trunchbull into a good teacher and turn the school into a place where there is no violence and no evil. Several classmates thought this script was not like children's literature, but like a detective story, full of suspense. However, C4's view was very different. She believed that this year's script was very good, very creative, and had a profound interpretation of the power of emotion. As for the attributes of children's literature, she believed that children's literature did not necessarily have to be innocent. Children must also be exposed to the real environment when they grew up. Good children's literature should also present these realities in moderation, rather than weaving utopias and deceiving children. She stated:

Children have to learn sooner or later that the world isn't as beautiful as they believe it is and the sooner they realize it, the better. Most teenage rebellions are caused by the lies teachers, parents and other adults cram into them and they rebel once they realize that all they've learned was far from reality...

7. Concluding Remarks

Children's literature through theatrical presentation should best able to meet the educational philosophy called experience. Students not only read the text, but also read its adaptation (script) out loud. Moreover, they make the script a visual experience, and immediately the passive text undergoes a dynamic visual and auditory transformation. The whole process is a combination of creativity and practice for students. Not only that, students are likely to realize in the whole process the ideas and values explored in the works—be it the definition/re-definition of family and educational institution as in the case of *Matilda*, or the meaning of friendship as in the case of *Charlotte's Web*.

It must be emphasized that these profound experiences of the text basically cannot be obtained from a simple brief lecture or reading. Many students recall that only when they are in the process of preparing the show, reading the text over and over again, discussing among themselves constantly, modifying the script numerous times, and

trying to figure out the characters and action, tone, and facial expressions, do they become gradually aware more of the unfathomed referential meanings behind the text. As Dewey stated, the art experience is an "action and undergoing process." Only as students repeatedly scrutinize, ponder, and stimulate the text, can meaning and value truly emerge, and allow for a better work of children's literature to be experienced in a profound way.

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