

When East Meets West: Cultural Similarities & Dissimilarities in Arthur Ransome's Children's Books

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Abstract

*Literature reflects both cultural values and universal human life. Do Taiwanese EFL student in general need to know about Pearl S. Buck, Mary Shelly's Dr. Frankenstein, Charles Dickens or John Steinbeck, especially when the role of literature seems to decline with the rapid advancement of technology? This paper intends to put forward the idea of specifying the role of literature in extensive reading. Learning different cultures promotes reflection on learning. It covers the place of cultural learning in EFL classrooms, problem of incorporating culture in the Taiwanese syllabus, justification of teaching Arthur Ransome's book to help students appreciate western culture and a brief introduction to Arthur Ransome's idea of writing children's literature. Relevance of themes and culture between the East and the West in the novel and cultural similarities and dissimilarities in Arthur Ransome's children's books are also stated. Opinions of learners on the study of literature were collected. A generic interview was designed to cover marginally learner variables such as attitudes and roles. Finally, empirical justification for using Arthur Ransome's literary work is done by working with one learner's 'voice' on reading *We didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (Ransome, 1934) and the goal she set for the reading task. This paper concludes with the claim that integrating literary work in English learning fosters learner autonomy as it encourages reading for pleasure.*

Keywords: *English children's literature, Arthur Ransome, Cultural similarities, Cultural dissimilarities, Learner autonomy*

Introduction

According to Stern (1992, p. 207-8), the concept of culture is difficult to define but it has to be done before we decide the topics and goals of teaching culture. Whether in Brook's terms described as 'formal culture as a capital C' or as 'way-of-life culture' which is referred to as 'culture with a small c', there is still no concise definition of culture. Seelye simply describes it as 'a broad concept that embraces all aspects of the life of man' (1984 cited in Stern 1992, p. 208). Moerman (1988, p. 4) gives a narrower definition: "Culture is a set – perhaps a system – of principles of interpretation, together with the products of that system". In this paper, Seelye's definition seems to fulfill the author's needs and purposes.

This paper argues that learner autonomy should be seen as a goal in which students understand their reading within educational and cultural contexts in the literary works. By setting goals for their own learning progress, learners examine their limitation of the vocabulary and their attempts to respond to questions in different communicative situations. It does not deal with the theoretical background. It does, however, marginally cover learner variables such as attitudes and roles. Language reflects culture. By reading the classics of children's literature, learners learn the value judgments which come from different cultures because they have been passed down from generation to generation and form part of the cultural heritage. The value of teaching English children's literature to EFL students has been emphasized for years (Widdowson, 1982). An all-important aspect for teachers of English children's literature is to open students' eyes to the world, as far as possible. As Littlewood (1999) states well that "if we define autonomy in educational terms as involving student' capacity to use their learning independently of teachers, then autonomy would appear to be an incontrovertible goal for learners" (p.73). Cotteral (2000) promotes the idea that learner autonomy should be seen as "an essential goal of all learning" (p.109).

For many writers, children's innocence has often been associated with wisdom – the stories consist of problem-solving patterns, adult-children relationships, the attitude to different classes and Nature, etc. A literature reading task is set up to foster learner autonomy. Very often the adults choose the books which they think children should read, taking into account vocabulary and content.

This article serves as a guide to teaching Taiwanese students how to appreciate Ransome's works from several different aspects. It is important to help students become more involved in the background knowledge, parent-child relationships, attitude to Nature (sailing environment) and food customs. Cultural differences are reflected clearly in English Children's books. Three books, namely "Swallows and Amazons", "Swallowdale", and "We didn't mean to go to sea" are mentioned. The first novel gives students the detailed description of the main characters in the series, the "Swallows" and the "Amazons children". They learn about the "Great Aunt" in "Swallowdale", and be taken up with the great surprise of their ending up in Holland by mistake in "We didn't mean to go to sea". Furthermore, the characters develop from book to book. A suitable adventure and setting for them in the third book would not have been at all suitable for them when we first meet them.

Through studying literature, students are involved in an authentic language environment, and they are able to learn and enjoy the cultural contexts. Children's literature deals with the life of other children in English speaking cultures, giving readers an idea of something they might want to consider trying. In so doing, it broadens the world of the reader by introducing themes from the culture where the language they are studying is spoken. It also presents the language of the children, in which a rich, repetitive vocabulary, a wide range of syntax structures, and generally a well-organized discourse are embedded.

Aspects of Culture in Literature Study

Do Taiwanese EFL students in general need to know about Charles Dickens, Mary Shelly, Pearl S Buck, Arthur Ransome or John Steinbeck? Learning different cultures promote reflection on learning. According to a survey conducted by the Author, 91 out of 136 of her EFL students (aged 17-20, including 44 from Department of Business Administration and 92 from Department of Applied Foreign Languages) cannot name even one English novel written by Charles Dickens. Many of them have no idea what the Frankenstein's monster is. This essay does not intend to pursue either of the novels but bring out the idea of encouraging extensive reading, in particular, the English children's literature.

Cultural Learning in EFL Classrooms in Taiwan

In Taiwan, most EFL students reflect their desire of gaining better language skills. This might be because the world of industry seems to put more focus on making more money than moulding good personality despite the fact that it takes the understanding of cultures to form decent walks of life. In his online article, Sonjae (2008) justify the reasons why English literature should be teaching. He states that people who are educated learn English literature in their school curricula and tend to be "creative and adaptable throughout their working life, and will be prepared to pursue the ongoing formation that is an inevitable consequence of the rapid pace of change in the modern world" and these people are what the modern society has less. Even modern British and American universities are facing a similar crisis in the Humanities. He goes on to say that as "life" being paraphrased by "culture", we should be "preparing our students to think about life by awakening in them a critical response to their own culture, by introducing them to other, different cultures, ways of living and of talking about life."

Brown (1986, p. 33) proposes that "second language is often second culture learning... one needs to understand the nature of acculturation, culture shock and social distance". Marckwardt (1981) advocates the use of literary works in language teaching as "literature expresses both cultural values and universal human values" (Marckwardt 1978 cited in Speck 1985, p.705). It is in that sense literature becomes important. Stern (1992, p.229) states that "historically literature was the main avenue to the target culture, but during the course of this century, as a result of the growing interest in a social and scientific approach to culture, the role of literature has declined and has been almost entirely crowded out." He acknowledges the neglect of literature today and questions whether it should be reconsidered for its specific role in culture teaching. He also stresses that "students should approach a culture not as a given to be acquired from books but rather as a topic for exploration" (Stern 1992, p.228).

Johnson (1981) found in his study that knowledge of cultural background is more difficult than knowledge of vocabulary in term of understanding literary works. For example, according to his teach-



ing experience of Rip Van Winkle, Povey's (1972) found that many Japanese students had difficulty in comprehending the husband-and-wife relationship. Inadequate linguistic knowledge may be more easily mended than the cultural gap, considering that teachers can always choose literary texts that are appropriate to students' linguistic competence (Chen, 1991, p.191). Gaskill (1991, p.5) suggests that teachers provide background knowledge to help students comprehend their reading material.

Robson (1989, p.25) has raised another criticism that literature seems to have no place either for "[utilizing] a specific sequence of language structures", because it is not written that way, or for the cultivation of listening and speaking skills. Ole (1991) points out that much of the language of the textbooks with their higher proportion of mechanical exercises is also unnatural because they are written for the purpose of teaching. Instead of grading the level difficulty of the texts, it may help students more by grading how much help teachers provide in the process of their teaching. For example, teachers can provide simplified texts or translation when teaching a literary work that is not written to utilize "a specific sequence of language structures", then gradually withdraw their help. Widdowson (1982, p. 205 quoted in Speck 1985, p. 705) points out that "Textbooks are full of fiction", and so, since students have to read fiction in any case, "why not offer them fiction of a higher standard than the textbook writer can provide?" Regarding the selection of literary works, Yang (1991, p.14) contends that only the level of English children's literature may be appropriate for literature study in the EFL classroom in Taiwan. EFL students need to know about the works of Charles Dickens, Mary Shelly, Pearl S Buck, Arthur Ransome or John Steinbeck because they learn the meaning of life and learn to mold their personalities through English study of different cultures.

Problem of Incorporating Culture in the Taiwanese Syllabi

Hymes (1971) stated that learning English involves not only manipulation of grammatical structure but also the social rules which govern appropriate speech. Yet, for the students described by Yang (1991, p.11), literature reading became merely the study of words, and they remained in the phase of word-identification instead of interpretation while reading literary works.

As the teaching of culture has become an accepted part of the second-language course, teachers are realizing how broad and how complex this subject matter really is (Valette 1977, p.263). In Taiwan, however, most students learn English under the pressure of the JCEE and GEPT and do not enjoy it for its own sake. It is English teachers' responsibility to encourage students to read English novels and to deal with both practical pedagogical and authentic purposes. The current EFL situation in Taiwan shows that there is a great need to improve EFL environment and to help EFL learners to enjoy what they learn in the process of learning. However, despite the fact that these have been fully recognized, most secondary teachers feel hesitant to explore them in their own classroom. It is time to bridge the gap between the two: Teachers should take on a collaborative role as instructors in both literature and language learning. If we aim to specify a syllabus that takes account of cultural similarities and differences between the native culture and foreign culture, we need to analyse the topics contained within texts. Hall (in Hinkel, 1999, p.151) asks "whose texts from which cultures do we choose to bring into our classroom?" This is a question for teachers and possibly together with students to ponder.

Cultural syllabus constructed in Taiwan

Judd points out that teachers' "limited access to naturally occurring language events" (Hinkel, 1999, p.133) limits their ability to teach appropriate rules and thereby avoid "paralinguistic failure" (Thomas 1983, 1984 in Hinkel 1992, p.153) on the part of their students.

The problem of teaching knowledge of culture, according to the paper by Tung (1991) taught Edith Wharton's short novel *Roman Fever* in Taiwan and found that students could not break through the cultural barrier such as how Americans think about European culture, and middle class men-women relationships.

Stern (1992, p.232) points out that one factor which has hindered the teaching which takes account of culture is the problem of syllabus design. He states that culture teaching materials are sometimes poorly defined within a second language program. Most literary texts in EFL textbooks are simplified literary works and are handled in the classroom in much the same way. One is dealt with within the tradition of the other. Non-literary texts such as 'Handling Stress' and "Cloning" are commonly included in the course books. The lack of reading full-length novels in the Taiwanese EFL syllabus may confirm Stern's viewpoint. The main approach of culture teaching, according to Stern, "has been regarded as incidental [relying] on isolated items, offered in the form of small units, cultural asides, culture capsules, cultural assimilators, mini-dramas, and the like". In many language classrooms culture is fre-

quently limited to “foods, fairs, folklore, and statistical facts” (Kramersch 1991, p. 218) contrast this with the situation in which points of cultural similarity and difference emerged from study of a whole connected text.

Literature may be set in the past, unrecognizable to students nowadays. It may “by virtue of characters’ class, education, or other factors, be otherwise irrelevant, and beyond the students’ imagination” (Robson 1989, p. 25). To argue against this, the Author would use what Hunt (1994) has pointed out in connection with children’s literature: “we are entering a world where the core of the texts is concerned with play, and where “the pleasure of the text is foremost” (p.26).

The Author found support from Povey’s study (1984) which promotes the use of American short stories in the ESL classroom, saying that “many foreign students actually like literature”. He addresses the problem that literary texts are often written beyond students’ capacity to understand and argues that reading texts is worthwhile even if not every word is understood, as long as students get the general gist. Such reading for gist is likely to be easier in handling extended texts than short extracts. On the basis of an ‘integration’ and ‘interpretation’ of words, syntactic structure, proposition, coherent and thematic restructuring of the text, the words and syntactic structures are interpreted and the proposition integrated. Inferences are built on to support the coherent and thematic restructuring of the text. Honeyfield (1977) says that deleting “localized information and cohesive devices in the books, elements which contribute to the readability of reading, will hinder the development of reading skills”. In other words, reducing the redundancy which helps readers to understand the central meaning of the text may create problems for the reader. The Author remembers the difficulty encountered when studying English literature in her sophomore year. She had to read many excerpts from different classic works with scant background knowledge of the writers and without further aids to help her through the readings. It was expected at a university level of English that students could gather such knowledge they needed on their own. Therefore why don’t we start English children’s literature in our senior high school education?

Justification of Teaching Arthur Ransome’s book to Help Students Appreciate Western Culture

According to Brogan (1984), Arthur Ransome’s idea of developing a story is first, “to be a story: only fiction could give the book the shape and impetus it needed” (p.303); second, to think of the possible readers; third, to capture the joy of sailing in a boat and going fishing in rivers and lakes. He needs to create adventures and describe exploration. Ransome is a man who seeks a relationship with Nature and likes the idea of living on an island.

Ransome’s themes are always concerned with play. His children are independent; even on holiday, they make their world secure without adults being around. Reading Ransome’s books gives rise to a vision of nature and society which might colour a child’s whole view of life.

It is important for the students in Taiwan to realise that Arthur Ransome’s books were very modern for their time, though they may seem a bit old-fashioned to the students nowadays. Although the language is from the 1930’s, much of it is still serviceable. It might be a good idea for modern students to understand how tough life was in the past so that they can cherish their current life better. Some old-fashion terms (e.g., telegram, dispatch, etc) can be guessed from the content when the students read through the texts. By comparing the modern private service of electronic mails through personal connection with the computer with the public service (post office) of telegram, the students in Taiwan can experience things in different time in England.

However, with so many varied TV programmes, films, books (full of other exciting topics such as sex and violence), can students appreciate Ransome’s books? Many students in Taiwan study English to pass gateway exams like Joint College Entrance Exam, TOEIC and IELTS. The extended English reading materials are normally assigned by English teachers. It is hoped that teachers play the role of guiding EFL students to read good children’s books.

Thematic and cultural relevancy

Damen’s (1987, p.191) work approaches the influence of culture on interaction and communication. She states that beliefs and values in different cultures represent distinct paradigms. She states that

values “bring affective force to beliefs” and centre on ideas of “good, proper, and positive, or the opposite”.

Children’s literature reflects the life of children in the context of a specific culture: for example, in case of reading *Swallows and Amazons* (Ransome, 1930) how middle-class English children behaved and were allowed to behave seventy-five years ago. The readers know why the children went to dairy farm to get milk every day. They learned from reading that the children were to put milk in the tea and put milk in the cereal. They also know from reading that scalding business of the milk-can will keep it from smelling sour. Perhaps readers are not familiar with the world of sailing, let alone knowing how to “scull over the stern of a boat” (*Swallows and Amazons*: 45). It is, to some degree, important for language learners to explore the detail of the cultural aspects of the novel. Examples such as how to make fire and how to make butter eggs are used to demonstrate the sequencing of doing things (Johns, Lee & Wang, 2008). English children’s literature was first designed, especially throughout the nineteenth century, to teach children morality. The subject matter in children’s literature centres in topics that relate to the children at the age, such as fairy stories and stories that give children moral lessons (Hunt, 1994). Judging from the reading of *Swallows and Amazons*, the Author reckons that Ransome presents opposition to the conventional role of children’s literature as a way of teaching morality. For example, in *Swallows and Amazons* (Ransome 1930) there is no real villain, the only ‘bad’ guys are the burglars who were punished not by the law but by getting a wooden fish (quite different from what they thought of ‘treasure’). The punishments in Ransome’s book are rather educational and playful (e.g., Captain Flint walking the plank).

McKay (1982, p.532) suggests that literary works with themes with which the students can ‘identify’ be selected. As Taiwan is an island, the idea of camping (‘uncomfortable’ holiday) and sailing is geographically relevant to the students. However, there are problems of sailing in the sea because of the political conflicts between Main China and Taiwan. As to camping, it is limited to boy scouts. *Swallows and Amazons* may become popular with the growing interest in sailing activities despite the fact that his works have not until now gained public recognition in Taiwan.

Although Ransome’s works are mostly set in a very British landscape which has restricted the range of readers, in Japan, he has for some time been available in translation. In that country he is relatively popular as shown by the establishment of the Japanese Arthur Ransome Society which predates the British Arthur Ransome Society. That popularity may be seen as a measure of the extent to which his books reflect the ideals of Oriental society: parents would like their children to behave well and lead a healthy outdoor life. Being Oriental countries, both Japanese and Taiwanese society share similar culture and values. Students can compare their lives to those of the children in England, for example, how much freedom were middle-class English children allowed to behave seventy-five years ago.

Food plays an important part in every culture. Food and drink are essential themes in *Swallows and Amazons*. The children in the book love their food and so do all Chinese. Part of the fun is in the way they give familiar modern foods names which would be more appropriate for adventures and pirates. For example, they used ‘Grog’ to describe ginger beer and lemonade; to give the impression that they were real pirates drinking real rum. This, according to the Author’s students, appealed to them very much. Learning the difference between two cultures also serves a learning purpose. Take the word ‘porridge’ for example, the English have porridge made of oats and eat it with milk and sugar. The Chinese have porridge made of rice and eat it with pickles.

Cultural Similarities

There are similarities between eastern and western cultures. Three particularly interesting western cultural phenomena from Ransome’s books which resemble eastern ones are discussed. Ransome tries to pin down exactly what each experience is like; what the appearance of things is; what the feeling of things is, which is tremendously important to children.

Parents love

A good example of detailed description of a mother’s care for the children is on page 43-46 (We didn’t mean to go to sea), when Mother and Bridget see the *Swallows* off to go sailing with Jim. She would have loved to join the crew, but admits ‘The extra sardine bursts the tin’ and in this rueful comment, her concern and love for them are made clear. This particular paragraph can be taught by comparing it with a well-known Chinese text, ‘Portrait of My Father from behind’ by Zhu Ziqing (1925), in which the writer recalls the scene of his old father seeing him off at the station. In order to buy him oranges, his father had to get laboriously down on to the railway track and up again on another platform. This is the

most successful Chinese account of a father's love for his child. Students can also discuss similar family values between the East and the West. Ransome found a good way to develop an adventure story: on the premise that parents were elsewhere. Ransome also has this kind of solution to make their adventures possible so they can organise their own life but within limits which their parents set.

Politeness

Politeness in the eyes of children is different from what it is in the eyes of parents. They have their own rules of obedience. Ransome's hidden agenda is, perhaps, that sailing on small ships with a small crew means that you have to be as aware of their existence (their unpredictable behaviour, their needs, their rights) as well as your own. This means that there are others on your horizon beyond yourself to be concerned about.

Most books about children show them squabbling and arguing. The Swallows don't argue because they use the idea of being in the navy, with ranks, Captain, able-seaman, mate in their language (i.e. 'Aye, aye, sir'). Like Chinese and Japanese, the Swallows have a strong sense of family and a sense of honour. The family and its structure are basically very Confucian'. Confucian society emphasises respect to elders, honour and duty.

Humour

Humour, in fact, is a remedy for the worst situations. It helps children realise that everything has two sides in life. Roger's sense of humour is reflected in many dialogues, for example, in his answer, 'It doesn't say anything about whistles?' (*We didn't mean to go to sea*, p. 97) when they try to make a noise to prevent other boats from colliding with theirs. In the scene in Ransome's (1937) "*We didn't mean to go to sea*", when John falls asleep during the troubled night (p. 196-8). There is a dialogue between Ransome and his cook:

I found myself, who do not sing in happier moments, yelling "Spanish Ladies" and "Summer is icumen in" and "John Peel" at the top of my voice. Then the Cook struggled up the companion way with a sandwich. She asked, with real inquiry, "Are we going to be drowned before morning?" I leaned forward from the steering well and shouted, "Why?"
"Because I have two thermos flasks full of hot coffee. If we are, we may as well drink them both. If not, I'll keep one till to-morrow." (p. 64)

The anti-climax, gallows humorous contrast between thoughts of drowning and the need to finish the flasks of hot coffee shows Ransome's skill in balancing heroic imagination against the pressure of fact. This humorous dialogue also echoes the famous telegram from the Walker father in *Swallows and Amazons* – "BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS IF NOT DUFFERS WONT DROWN" (p.2). The father was aware of the potential danger of his children being themselves in the water without parents' presence. However, he hoped his children were not fools and would not drown. The Walkers know their children so well that they believe they would not be 'duffers' (Ransome, 1932). The children's father is implicitly saying that he trusts his children not to behave stupidly, by declaring that if they do, they'd be better off drowned. Indeed, a sense of humour is what students nowadays need to acquire to cope with their stress from study and frustration.

Cultural Dissimilarities

The Walker parents are loved and respected but not because they do everything for their children. On the contrary, it's because they urge them to be independent. The Swallows are the children of a naval commander, very earnest, scientific and conventional in many ways. The mother, who likes to play games with the children, loves camping (*Swallows and Amazons*: 213-224), knows the meanings of naval flags (*We didn't mean to go to sea*: 81) and has had much experience of sailing. In the case of Taiwan, not many parents go camping and sailing with the kids and play along with children's games. Many parents in Taiwan prefer making money to spending time learning from playing games with their children.

Mentioning of 'death' is supposed to be a taboo in the Chinese culture. It's interesting to find that how a taboo mentioned by a parent, imagining their children being drown in Ransome's books. It is strikingly different from the way a Chinese parent would put it. For example, Chinese would never mention death before carrying out a project, as a way of keeping bad luck distant. English might mention death, but only as a joke, in order to keep it distant. The Walker father knows his children so well that he believes they would not be 'duffers'. There is no question that he means this literally. The following examples show how humour and understatement in English writing operates in connection with death.

“We are going home at the end of the week. It would be a pity if two or three of you were to get drowned first.” (Swallows and Amazons: 257). (This is understated humour, to express concern by way of putting it into a joke.)

Note that Chinese and English parents want the same – safety for their children – but they obtain it by opposite means: Chinese, by not mentioning the possibility of tragedy; English, by mentioning it ironically (the opposite attitude to death).

Responsibility shared among the children plays a very important part in the novel. Everyone, irrespective of age, class and background, shows a sense of responsibility in Ransome’s world. The children take responsibility for their own well-being, just as their parents take responsibility for letting them camp and sail by themselves. Living independently on an island, the children also avoid day-to-day conflict with parents (Tucker, 1995).

The ways they show their love are different. Arthur Ransome, for example, describes the adventures of the Swallows who solve each problem as it arises: they have to cope with the possible dangers of leaving the harbour and going to sea by accident (We didn’t mean to go to sea). Students in Taiwan, with their traditional background, need to learn this kind of freedom and risk-taking and learn to be independent.

Attitude towards Learning New Skills (Sailing)

Bernd Dorper, a German national who works for the Sailing Association in Taiwan and helps to publicize sailing, in the hope that one day it will become popular in Taiwan by writing a book on sailing skills, was invited to the class. He shared some cultural difference he learned in his experience of sailing.

One of the problems he found in his experience of teaching Taiwanese children how to sail was that the students in Taiwan, in his opinion have no chance to explore sailing and therefore it is very difficult for them to identify with people who sail. He gave an example of how a Taiwanese young man had reacted when he had never explored this pursuit before. Bernd Dorper felt that he had virtually no foundation on which to build his knowledge of sailing despite the fact that he thinks that teaching young crew basic knowledge of seamanship is crucial because it helps build young people’s strength toward life endurance. Even though Taiwan is an island, there is still a long way to go before young people can think of it as ‘the’ island (not just ‘an’ island) and feel at home on the water.

According to Bernd, some Taiwanese students’ English sailing vocabulary was very limited and had no intention of learning something in which they felt no interest. Others interacted with Bernd and even on his behalf with other students, trying to explain what he was saying to them. The questions they produced were very precise. In fact, these students were qualified to be taken on board if a live sailing experience had been on offer. Yet, still some others showed moderate interest, choosing not to be too involved but were politely attentive in Bernd’s class. It would be interesting to find out what the situation would have been like if the trial teaching had been given to another group of students of much greater proficiency.

As to the differences between the attitudes of boys and girls learning about sailing, in general, according to Bernd’s experience of going sailing with other team members, girls are better than boys once they become involved, while the boys are eager at first but soon lose their enthusiasm. Girls, in contrast, are difficult to motivate at the outset but once involved they show their determination and strength. Ellen McArthur (2003) is a good example of this.

Student Voice: A Report of an 18 year-old Student on Reading *We didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*

Reading the first three Swallows and Amazons novels by Arthur Ransome helps students get familiar with the main characters. The Author chose *We didn’t mean to go to sea* for Joanne, a 18-year-old subject student with whom the interview was conducted, because it was an immediate success on publication and there is the great surprise at the end of the book which the Author thought might be more likely to attract teenagers.

Opinions of Learners on the Study of Literature

The Author gathers opinions of 14 learners aged 17-18 at National Taipei College of Business on the problems they have in studying literature in general and found that students thought of reading as vocabulary memorization, and were discouraged from reading because texts contain too many new words. Other students thought of reading not as enjoyable but boring because of the subject matter in the textbook and exam. As to reading literary works, students generally thought it was more fun reading literature because they were not asked to take tests on the books. They preferred books that were not too long to finish and they thought the topics of extended texts might be boring and lack variety in content. They thought that if teachers could help to introduce them to good literature, they would have a better chance of learning to value its unique pleasures. They stated that time constraints limited their opportunities to read more. This, again, culturally different as time management seems to be more problematic here in Taiwan because they have far too many subjects to study. Now that they are studying in college, they are entitled to be nice to themselves after the cramming, rigorous English learning experience in their senior high schools.

Expectation of An 18 year-old student on reading *We didn't Mean to Go to Sea*

Knowles and Malmkjær (1996) note that there is not enough good selection of teens' novels for the readers who are too old for children's books; nevertheless, too young for 'adult' literature. They describe that some writers who try to present realistic kind of stories such as 'romance, sex, death, family tensions, social class, teenage violence and race relations' are becoming popular in England. Teenagers might share the same interest worldwide. In the case of Taiwan, still most EFL students could in their leisure time read the topics that appeal to them whether in Chinese or in English. Yet with the great pressure of passing all sorts of proficiency Tests, they value studying for the tests over their personal interests. However if they read English novels those are likely to be ones recommended by the teacher. For example, Joanna reads *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (Ransome, 1937) as told and suggests that the reading would be fun if the plots are more stimulated and exciting.

Method

The Author sent the book to Joanne, a former student by post and received her report by E-mail. Joanne had stayed in the United States for one year at the age of 13 and since then she has retained her love for English, which she updates constantly. Ever since she took to English novels, she has fallen in love with English-speaking movies, especially American ones. Another thing to note is that her English is excellent compared with the average college students in Taiwan.

After the reading task was given, it gave rise to the question—what is the reading goal of the student reader? The student reader set her reading goals such as 1) uptake her local level of guessing words, and 2) more global level of guessing the development of the narrative. It took nearly three weeks for the report to arrive owing to both her lack of interest in the first few chapters of the book and her other preoccupations. During the process, she gave her reactions through e-mails.

Result

Typically children come across Ransome before the age of puberty (7-12) in England. What sort of difficulties might Taiwanese teens have in reading it? Joanna incorporates her findings on the sort of problems she thinks that her peers might have in reading Ransome's book.

Her first reaction to the book is not about the difficulty of the vocabulary but the theme of the book and also the fact that the book was written a long time ago both from the setting of the book and the usage of words. Her reaction was different from what the Author expected. She said that the readers needed more exciting plots or incidents to connect with their interests, to motivate them to carry on reading it. On the contrary, a film audience gains excitement from the presentation itself. With movies, the audience needs less imagination to understand the story. As a reader as well as a movie lover, Joanne, however, approves of the illustrations – helpful, though not as vivid as watching a film.

As a girl in her late teens normally does, Joanne adores Brad Pitt and expects Jim Brading to look like him, but later is disappointed by the fact that he is killed off after 89 pages – though he does return (in not quite a heroic form, but weak and wearing a turban). This almost kills her enthusiasm. It is unusual

for a college student to notice the level of description of the characters, but she does in comparison with that in the Harry Potter book. The cause of her misjudgement – she thinks that only Jim Brading is fully described in the book – is that she never read the earlier books in the series, *Swallows and Amazons* and *Swallowdale*, which describe the children in detail.

Another interesting point she makes is that *We didn't mean to go to sea* is a Paramount movie in comparison with Harry Potter, which might be a Walt Disney one. The difference lies in her comment about teenagers regarding books on different themes differently. In fact, the book doesn't much appeal to her because her hope of the book reaching the climax she would prefer dies when she reaches page 89 with the loss of Jim Brading.

Joanne immediately notices the value of the underlying morality in this book. She is impressed by the morals in the novel in which children are considerate, disciplined and keeping a promise.

It is the Author's concern that the grammar and vocabulary-oriented English teaching methodology is still deep-rooted in Taiwan. When asked what is the good of using this book as an education tool, and what she thinks of its grammar and vocabulary, her answer is perhaps a little negative, in that she deplores the transparency and straightforwardness of the grammatical constructions. It is again the current exam orientation which colours judgement on the question of using this book for a comparison of two cultures; but she realises its moral value, as the previous paragraph shows.

As to what Joanna has pointed out, the activity of sailing is not popular, the following reasons may be adduced (supplied by the Sailing Association of Taiwan). 1) Parents in Taiwan often discourage children when they are very young from going near the water because of worrying about their safety. 2) The expense of sailing is too high for most young people. 3) July, when the summer holiday begins, is a ghost month. Children are told particularly not to go near the water. 4) Taiwanese law limits sea-side activities.

To the Author's regret, at the end of reading the book, which she managed to finish, she was reluctant to recommend it as teaching material. Still, studying one case alone may not be a typical reaction to this book. One should remain optimistic and try not to overgeneralise.

Conclusion

In response to Sonjae's (2008) justification of the importance of learning different cultures, the Author contends that only reading literary works which are full of descriptions of different cultures can EFL students immerse themselves in the fun of extensive reading. To Taiwanese senior high school students, the subject matters of a book does not have to mirror exactly the students' life outside the classroom but may provide them with ideas about what other patterns of life are possible. A literary work which can inspire students' sympathetic interest and curiosity is more likely to have a lasting impact. For example, Ransome's subject matter is about the adventure of sailing. Most young people in Taiwan do not have a chance to sail, but Ransome's works help them to live an imaginary life which is made real by reading his book – *Swallows and Amazons*. As Muggeridge (1930) said, 'a good children's book should...cater for all children who indulge in stories about, for example, the world of sailing, but have not been so fortunate as to have a boat'.

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