

## **Examining the Overall Quality of English/Chinese Bilingual Children's Picture Books: Issues and Possibilities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study was intended to examine the overall quality of 31 recently published bilingual children's picture books in English/simplified Chinese, English/simplified Chinese with pinyin, and English/traditional Chinese. These books were analyzed from six aspects, which were genre, topic, cover and body, the credibility of authors, illustrators and translators, illustration, and theme. Findings from this study included that the reviewed English/Chinese bilingual books covered a variety of genres and topics; the information on the covers of the reviewed books may or may not be consistent with the presentation and sequence of various scripts in their bodies; the information about the authors, illustrators, and translators was limited; illustrations contained some stereotypical and culturally inappropriate images; the themes in the reviewed books was found to promote bilingualism, promote multicultural, and some that were neutral. After the analysis of the overall quality of the reviewed English/Chinese bilingual books, the researchers discuss the issues involved in these bilingual books and point out areas that can be improved.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The number of students who come from other countries is dramatically growing in the United States. The increasing diversity in American classrooms calls for the development of new teaching pedagogies and new curricula. Research on multicultural literature showed that it presents powerful teaching pedagogies for multicultural education. Multicultural literature develops students' academic skills (Dressel, 2005), promotes students' cognitive skills (Dressel, 2005; Fran, 2007; Hefflin and Barksadale-Ladd, 2001), and enhances students' language skills (McCallister, 2004; Moll and Gonzalez, 1994). While multicultural literature is defined in different ways, this study only focuses on bilingual children's books that have all texts in dual languages throughout.

More bilingual children's books are published every year in the U.S. and bilingual children's books offer many possibilities in meeting the needs of our diverse classrooms. However, limited research on the quality of bilingual books has not yielded a comprehensive understanding of authenticity, accuracy, and presentation of illustrations in bilingual texts. Therefore, it is critical to scrutinize the quality of bilingual books. Most of the literature on multicultural resources has been focused either on English/Spanish bilingual books (e.g., Peck, 2007; Schon, 1983) or on multicultural literature primarily written in English (e.g., Chappell & Faltis, 2007; Reddish, 2000; Tsarykovska, 2005). Considering the large population of English

language learners whose native language is Chinese and Chinese language learners in the U.S. schools, it is worth special attention to evaluate the quality of English/Chinese bilingual books.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Quality of Bilingual Books

High quality bilingual books have a few key characteristics. According to Whiteside (2007), high quality bilingual books have features such as easy comprehensibility and wide availability to readers. In addition, high quality bilingual books should have a bilingual title and bilingual themes throughout the whole of the book (including the table of contents, glossary, and an index in two languages that must have equal prominence), clearly weave relationships among the illustrations, text, and themes, emphasizing words or phrases when needed, and provide additional information; for example, parent notes, a picture dictionary, pronunciation guide, map, related language information, and related culture information (Whiteside, 2007).

Whiteside (2007) also referred to some features of low quality bilingual books, which include: (1) cultural stereotypes, mismatched with the educational purpose; (2) surplus information that has negative effects on readers; (3) intrusive illustrations that reduce the importance of the text and the accuracy of cultural depictions; (4) illustrations that diverge from the text and that inhibit the understanding of the foreign language; (5) different reading levels between bilingual books and children that may depress children's interest in reading; and (6) the majority of information that was displayed only in one language.

Illustrations are a fundamental part in picture books. Children's attention can be attracted by the qualities of illustrations (Carolyn & Audrey, 2005). Illustrations "help express and enhance the story" (Naidoo & Lopez-Robertson, 2007, p. 26). Therefore, the quality of illustration warrants our special attention. Positive illustrations can "make children feel respected and included" while "inaccurate and stereotypical images" lead to children's "negative self-images" and "feelings of shame for one's culture and oneself" (Naidoo & Lopez-Robertson, 2007, p. 26). Illustrations should "accurately depict the culture that they are portraying" (Naidoo & Lopez-Robertson, 2007, p. 26).

Naidoo and Lopez-Robertson (2007) also discussed cultural authenticity in bilingual books. It is possible that authors write non-authentic stories as they are the "outsider (s)" (p. 25) of the target culture and base their stories on limited experience and contact with the culture. To portray a story accurately, authors should research the target culture instead of assuming knowledge. As two aspects of cultural authenticity, cultural perspective and translation can also influence the quality of a bilingual book. "Cultural perspective is issue of cultural aliveness and cultural difference" (Naidoo & Lopez-Robertson, 2007, p. 25). Whether the author is from the target culture group or not, "cultural aliveness" and "cultural difference" can be reflected if the author successfully persuades the reader by his/her strong knowledge of the culture (Naidoo & Lopez-Robertson, 2007, p. 25). According to the authors, "Translations significantly affect the cultural authenticity of a book" (p. 25). A good translation, true to the original text, fluent, accurate and elegant, can bridge two different cultures. In contrast, a poor translation, such as awkward dialogue, the use of wrong words, and overgeneralization, can inhibit comprehension (Barrera & Quiros, 2003, as cited in Naidoo & Lopez-Robertson, 2007).

## **The Need of Reviewing English/Chinese Bilingual Books' Quality**

It is critical to examine the issues and possibilities of bilingual children's books as they show great potential to become valuable resources in diverse classrooms. While bilingual children's books offer many possibilities in meeting the needs of many students groups, limited researches referred to the overall quality of bilingual books and especially English/Chinese bilingual books. Moreover, there are multiple forms of English/Chinese bilingual books due to the complexity of the Chinese in its written form. Simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese are the two commonly used forms of Chinese characters. Differences exist between simplified Chinese and traditional Chinese. Simplified Chinese has simplified its form structurally and reduced the number of strokes that is present in traditional Chinese. Pinyin is the alphabetic system developed to help with pronunciation of simplified Chinese.

### **METHOD**

#### **The Study**

This is a mixed method study that examines the overall quality of the subject books. Internet research was conducted to identify the accessible English/Chinese bilingual books in U.S. markets for this study. Here the books were selected based on the following criteria: (1) written for children; (2) recognized as picture books; (3) published from 1998 to 2008; (4) identified as English/simplified Chinese bilingual books, including pinyin (if available); and (5) noted as English/traditional Chinese bilingual books.

Thirty one picture books that carry multiple English/Chinese titles were selected for this study. Out of these books, 20 were simplified English/Chinese books, two were English/simplified Chinese (with pinyin) books, and nine were English/traditional Chinese books. All these books came from two publishing houses: Mantra Lingua and Milet. The two researchers closely examined each book independently and the overall quality of bilingual books was scored. Differing views between the researchers were discussed until a consensus was reached. The process of examining the overall quality of each book was conducted twice.

#### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The overall quality of 31 books was evaluated based on the following six criteria: (1) genre, (2) topic, (3) cover and body, (4) the credibility of authors, illustrators, and translators, (5) illustration, and (6) book theme.

Genre was defined as the type of the reviewed books. The topic referred to the books' original text was either general or culturally specific. The cover and body related to the bilingual feature on covers (e.g., simplified Chinese/English or English/Chinese) may or may not be consistent with the presentation and sequence of various scripts in their bodies. The credibility of authors, illustrators and translators was defined as the information regarding the authors, the illustrators, and the translators, such as their background information and publication. This information came from the reviewed books, publisher's website, and websites through a Google search. Illustration was examined to see if the images were stereotypical or culturally appropriate and sensitive. The theme was recognized as the overarching idea of the book and whether it was balanced between two languages and cultures.

## FINDINGS

### Genre

The reviewed books cover a variety of genres (see Table 1). Thirteen genres were identified, which were folktale, patterned book, diary, animal fantasy, narrative, fable, informational, nursery rhyme, poetic, narrative poem and repetitive, personal account, realistic fiction, and traditional literature. Although a large collection of the reviewed books is informational books, the reviewed books covered a broad range of genres. For example, *Eating* (Swain, 2000) is an informational book. This book informs readers the food culture in different cultures. *The Little Red Hen and the Grains of Wheat* (Hen, 2005) is a folktale story about sharing. The narrative story *Augustus and His Smile* (Rayner, 2008) tells us a tiger Augustus lost his smile and tries to find his smile everywhere. At last, he found his smile by his experience in the natural world. *The Lucky Grain of Corn* (Tadjo, 2000c) is traditional literature, originating from Africa.

**Table 1.** Percentage of English/Chinese Bilingual Books' Genre

| Genre                         | Number of Books | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|------------|
| Folktale                      | 6               | 19%        |
| Patterned Book                | 1               | 3%         |
| Diary                         | 1               | 3%         |
| Animal Fantasy                | 2               | 6%         |
| Narrative                     | 3               | 10%        |
| Fable                         | 1               | 3%         |
| Informational                 | 8               | 26%        |
| Nursery Rhyme                 | 1               | 3%         |
| Poetic                        | 1               | 3%         |
| Narrative Poem and Repetitive | 1               | 3%         |
| Personal Account              | 2               | 6%         |
| Realistic Fiction             | 1               | 3%         |
| Traditional Literature        | 3               | 10%        |

### Topic

The topics of books were categorized into two categories: general and culture-specific. A little more than half of the reviewed books had a general topic. For example, *Dear Zoo* (Campbell, 2004) is a general topic story which tells readers the experience in requesting a pet from the zoo. *Farmer Duck* (Waddell, 2006) is a story about justice and human traits. Culturally specific topics included stories came from China, the Middle East, Korea, ancient Greece, Jamaica, Germany, and Africa. For instance, *The Dragon's Tears* (Gregory, 2001) is a Chinese story about how the 24 lakes of the Min River get their name from a boy. *Grandma Nana* (Tadjo, 2000b) is a moving story about a kind Africa Grandma Nana. She was loved by children because she shared her laughter with them. Table 2 summarizes the breakdown of topics among the bilingual books.

**Table 2.** Percentage of English/Chinese Bilingual Books' Topic

| Topic            |                | Number of Books | Percentage |
|------------------|----------------|-----------------|------------|
| General          |                | 21              | 68%        |
| Culture-specific | China          | 3               | 10%        |
|                  | Middle East    | 1               | 3%         |
|                  | Korea          | 1               | 3%         |
|                  | Ancient Greece | 1               | 3%         |
|                  | Jamaica        | 1               | 3%         |
|                  | Germany        | 1               | 3%         |
|                  | Africa         | 3               | 10%        |

### Cover and Body

Fifty two percentage of the books' cover was found to be inconsistent with its body and 48% of the books whose cover was consistent. For example, the cover of *Sahir Goes to the Dentist* (Petty, 2006) indicated English/simplified Chinese, suggesting that simplified Chinese would follow English in its bodies. Its cover was consistent with the presentation and sequence of scripts in it bodies. However, the covers in *Mamy Wata and the Monster* (Tadjo, 2000a) and *Ellie's Secret Diary* (Barkow, 2004) were inconsistent with the presentation and sequence of scripts in their bodies. The cover of *Mamy Wata and the Monster* (Tadjo, 2000a) showed English/Chinese, suggesting that English in its body was supposed to be followed by Chinese; but its body had traditional Chinese first, followed by English. The cover of *Ellie's Secret Diary* (Barkow, 2004) indicated English/simplified Chinese, suggesting that simplified Chinese was followed by English. However, the two languages in its body switch the sequence back and forth.

### Author, Translator, and Illustrator Credibility

Some authors and illustrators have published many books and won awards. The author of *The Wheels on the Bus* (Kubler, 2005) is a highly regarded children's books author. Kubler has published many books, for instance, *Bao Baa Black Sheep* (Kubler, 2007), *Don't You Dare, Dragon* (Kubler, 2007), *The Mixed-up Caterpillar* (Kubler, 2006), *See-Saw! Nursery Songs* (Kubler, 2006), and *Pat-A-Cake!: Nursery Rhymes* (Kubler, 2006). The author of *Farmer Duck* (Waddell, 1996) is an award winning children's author. Waddell was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Award for Children's Literature in 2004. The illustrator of *I Took the Moon for a Walk* (Curtis, 2008) has illustrated many books, such as *Listen, Listen!* (Gershator, 2007), *If Kisses Were Colors* (Lawler, 2003), *Today is the Birthday of the World* (Heller, 2009), *The Race* (Jay, 2006), *A Ladder to the Stars* (Puttock, 2006), *What Star Is This?* (Slate, 2005), and *ABC: A Child's First Alphabet Book* (Jay, 2005). The illustrator of *Fox Fables* (Casey, 2006b) is Jago who is an award winning children's book illustrator. Jago has won many awards, such as the Jesus Storybook Bible, Myron's Magic Cow in 2006, NLA Wow! Award in 2006, AOL Silver Award in 2004, Highly Commended Award in 2003, and the Winner of the UK Further Education Funding Council Calendar Prize in 2000.

One non-native Chinese translator translated the majority of books at two major publishers. Sylvia Denham translated the majority of books from English to Chinese at Mantra Lingua, including *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Attard, 2005), *Nita goes to Hospital* (Barkow,

2005), *Tom and Sofa Start School* (Barkow, 2006), and *Hansel and Gretel* (Gregory, 2005). Davis Tsai translated many books at Milet, such as *Carrying* (Swain, 2000c), *Eating* (Swain, 2000a), and *Celebrating* (Swain, 2000b). On rare occasions, there were translators who are ethnically Chinese based on their names. For instance, *The Lucky Grain of Corn* (Tadjo, 2000c) is translated by a certain Lori Chen.

The information about authors, illustrators, and translators is limited. Although some books presented the names of the author, illustrator, or translator in the cover page, some books were anonymous. For instance, the names of the author and translator of *Dear Zoo* (Campbell, 2004) were missing from the cover page; the names of the illustrator and translator of *Sleepyhead* (Smee, 2002) were not provided in the cover page. Even if these bilingual books had the author, or illustrator, or translator's name in the cover page, further background information regarding the credibility of the authors, illustrators, or translators in some books was not accessible, such as previous awards and potentially related experiences. The information about the author and illustrator of *Sahir Goes to the Dentist* (Petty, 2006) was not accessible from either the book, publisher's website, or the Internet. Information about *Mamy Wata and the Monster* (Tadjo, 2000a)'s translator was unavailable. It is hard to get translator's information from the book, publisher's website, and the Internet. The only information available regarding some translators is that we are simply just informed they translated many books previously.

Publishers had no or limited information about authors, illustrators, and translators on their websites. As previously noted, these 31 books were published by two publishers: Mantra Lingua and Milet. Mantra Lingua provided no information about authors, illustrators, or translators. Milet only supplied minimal information. Information on authors and illustrators included their educational background, related experience, and the awards won.

## Illustration

Illustration contained some stereotypical and culturally inappropriate images in Chinese and western cultural groups. Some pictures in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Attard, 2005) showed knife violence, blood and immolation. These pictures are not appropriate for young children in the U. S. Some of the illustrations in *Welcome to the World Baby* (Robert, 2005) were inappropriate in Chinese culture. One of the pages portrayed close physical distance between students of different genders. *Yeh-Hsien: A Chinese Cinderella* (Casey, 2006a) also contained stereotypical and culturally inappropriate images. The helper in this book looked like the image of Jesus. In Chinese culture, the helper is typically a knowledgeable male similar to the image of Confucius. In the same book, all the women had identical faces, hairstyles, and clothes. All people in this book had a fan in their hand at the banquet. These illustrations reinforced stereotypical images of Chinese people, namely that all Chinese people look alike.

## Themes

For this study, theme was categorized into three groups: promoting multiculturalism, promoting bilingualism, and neutral. Promoting multiculturalism was documented as the books' original texts origin from different cultures, and the storyline and/or illustration promoted the acceptance of difference. Promoting bilingualism was identified as promoting the acceptance of different languages. Neutral was known as the book address a common topic.

Among the books discussed in the study, a little more than half of the books promoted multiculturalism. Promoting multiculturalism was recognized as the books' original texts from different cultures. For example, *Yeh-Hsien: A Chinese Cinderella* (Casey, 2006a) was a folktale originated from China. *The Crow King* (Attard, 2005) was a fable from Korea which was about a fight between a brave man and the evil Crow king. Promoting multiculturalism was also noted as the books' storyline and/or illustrations promoting the acceptance of difference. *Floppy* (Genechten, 1999) was a book that sends out the message of accepting differences among people. Another example of promoting multiculturalism was the pictures in *Tom and Sofa Start School* (Barkow, 2006). The illustration showed the diversity by illustrating a boy in a wheel chair and children came from different cultures. Over one third of the reviewed bilingual books had neutral as book theme. Neutral was known as the book addressed a common topic, such as family or school bullying. *Ellie's Secret Diary* (Barkow, 2004) was a story about school bullying. The character in this story was a girl who experienced hardship in getting along with another girl in her school. She stated her problem in school and how she learned to handle bullies in her real life. A small portion of the books promoted bilingualism. Promoting bilingualism was identified as promoting the acceptance of different languages. A puppy in *Minutka: The Bilingual Dog* (Mycek-Wodecki, 2008) shared his joy of being bilingual in English and Chinese.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, the overall quality of the reviewed bilingual books was discussed in six areas, including genre, topic, cover and body, the credibility of authors, illustrators and translators, illustration, and book theme. According to the findings, the reviewed bilingual books covered a variety of genres and topics; the information on covers of the reviewed books may or may not be consistent with the presentation and sequence of various scripts in their bodies; not enough information regarding the credibility of the authors, illustrators, or translators was available; illustration contained some stereotypical and culturally inappropriate images in Chinese and western cultures; book theme was found to promote bilingualism, promote multicultural, and neutral.

The reviewed English/Chinese bilingual books covered a variety of genres and topics. While the majority of the reviewed books' genre was informational, other genres were available. Though the topic of the majority reviewed books was general, other topics were accessible. These data suggest that the wide range of bilingual books' genres and topics has the potential to interest most children.

Due to the complexity of the Chinese language, the information on covers of the reviewed books may or may not be consistent with the presentation and sequence of various scripts in their bodies. It is clear that the inconsistency may cause some confusion for potential readers. Some books did not clearly point out the specific Chinese language feature, for instance, whether the book is in simplified or traditional Chinese, with or without the pronunciation symbols (e.g., pinyin). It is hard for non-Chinese speakers figure out the language feature from the unclear information on the cover.

Most of the bilingual books in this study fail to provide enough information regarding the author, illustrator, or translator credibility. Most books provide no background information about the translator. This makes it harder to evaluate the qualification and credibility of those involved in their production.

Illustration in the reviewed bilingual books contained some stereotypical and culturally inappropriate images. It appears that the illustration had not been vigorously reviewed and the illustrator lacked professional training. Themes in the reviewed books were found to promote bilingualism, promote multicultural, and neutral. It is suggested that publishers commit to balancing two languages and cultures.

While high quality English/Chinese bilingual books benefit English or Chinese language learners/readers, low quality English/Chinese bilingual books could negatively affect them. It is better that the publishers vigorously review a book before the book comes to market. High standards should be set when selecting authors, illustrators, and especially translators (as translation is one of the most vital parts in bilingual books). Teachers, librarians, and parents should ask for suggestions from the people who are bilingual to recommend high quality English/Chinese bilingual books. Future research could focus on the strategies to use English/Chinese bilingual books in Chinese as the foreign language classroom and English as the second language classroom with Chinese speaking students.

A synopsis was generated from the major categories from this study to guide future researchers and educators in their selection of various bilingual children's books. These guidelines include:

1. Author, illustrator, and translator credibility in terms of culture and language: The credibility includes their names, credentials, related experience, publication, and any awards. The publishers' websites should provide information about these participants.
2. Cover and body consistency: The bilingual feature on covers should be consistent with the presentation and sequence of scripts in their texts.
3. Themes should promote bilingualism, promote multicultural awareness, and address a common topic. The books' original texts come from different cultures, the storyline and/or illustration should promote the acceptance of difference, and the text should promote the acceptance of different languages.
4. Illustration is free of stereotypical and culturally inappropriate images, as well as simultaneously promoting multicultural awareness. Illustration, gender issues, and the subject culture must be authentic (Whiteside, 2007).
5. Variety of genres and topics should be available. Genres include historical fiction, fantasy fiction, science fiction, mystery, adventure, comedy, legend, biography, and romance. Topics include texts from different countries and different cultural groups.
6. With the help of cultural/linguistic insiders, examine accuracy and cultural appropriateness of topic, translation, and illustration.

We have a long way to learn to cope with diversity in our society. Our examination of English/Chinese bilingual children's books has shown that books are a possible way to build connections between home and school and encourage all children to embrace diversity. Nonetheless, the quality and the impact of these books play a critical role in achieving this goal. Thus, it is critical to examine the issues and possibilities of children's books. The findings from this study increase our general understanding of high quality literature. Implications from this study shed light on how to select children's books. The ultimate goal is to serve the needs of all students and help them achieve the best of their personal potential.



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## APPENDIX

### List of Reviewed Books

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