

Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on children's vocabulary learning and storybook reading. First, the importance of vocabulary in early literacy and its relation to reading will be covered. Then, influence of storybook on children's language development, effective storybook reading instruction and shared storybook reading will be further discussed.

Children's Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary is a primary and essential element for children's literacy development. Without proper vocabulary storage, one cannot proceed to reading activities, and the lack of reading ability leads to unsuccessful academic performances. Details are further reviewed in the following sections.

Vocabulary and Early Literacy

Learning new vocabulary is a major part of language acquisition, and vocabulary building is a huge task. The average vocabulary size of American or British high school graduate is approximately 60,000 words; that is learning about 10 words a day (Bloom, 2000). If children ought to learn that much words in school, they would be loaded with works. Quite surprisingly, children differ in their vocabulary size at very early age. L1 reports reveal even as early as preschool age, some children are already far behind from their classmates (Justice, 2002; Allor & McCathren, 2003). The reason for children to lag in literate skills is mainly due to their lack of exposure to reading materials, especially those from low social-economical families.

Given the importance of vocabulary to children's early literacy development, how children build their literacy is still the interest of many researchers. Some suggests that incidental exposure to language plays an important role in children's emergent literacy development, especially when they have not obtained the skill to read words. Bloom (2000) mentioned children have the ability to learn words through linguistic context. The best way for children to learn a word is by hearing it used in a conversation, or by encountering it through written context. Similarly, Robbins and Ehri (1994) consented that children's incidental learning of novel words is most likely to occur while listening to conversation, watching television, and participating in shared book reading interaction. No doubt early book experiences contribute to one's later linguistic growth and academic performance.

Relationship Between Vocabulary and Reading

Reading is a complex cognitive activity that requires interactive high-level and low-level processing. Although word is only a small unit of syntactic system, efficient word recognition skills are a crucial prediction of fluent reading for both native and foreign language learners (Taguchi, 1997). Vocabulary size coincides with reading fluency. If a reader has poor vocabulary knowledge, he will encounter difficulties while reading. This lack of automaticity in decoding words will hinder a reader from comprehending, thus decreasing his motivation for reading, or even stopping him from reading.

While vocabulary is one of the important units of reading comprehension, children's vocabulary size also plays a major role in later vocabulary growth. Not only children use vocabulary in oral speaks, their vocabulary size is strongly correlated with their school performance. There are several possible explanations for this.

Mainly, children with more vocabularies are better readers, and reading leads them to encounter a larger amount of text. In this way, they are able to grasp meaning from the text and act more actively in acquiring vocabulary referring to reading text (Daalen-Kapteijns, Elshout-Mohr & Glopper, 2001). For that reason, children with high vocabulary capacity exceed those with low vocabulary capacity in both quality and quantity aspect of vocabulary acquisition.

Above all, one's level of vocabulary knowledge is closely correlated with one's reading fluency and comprehension. In other words, vocabulary knowledge is crucial for a successful reader.

Storybook and Vocabulary Learning

Children build literacy through incidental exposure to reading materials, dialogues, and language-rich environments. Storybooks are therefore widely used to promote children's language learning. The following literature focuses on the effect storybooks have upon children's vocabulary learning, and introduces efficient instructions for storybook reading.

How Storybook Supports Children's Literacy

Storybook reading is one of the primary activities associated with children literacy (Senechal, 1997; Schickedanz, 1999; Justice, 2002; Allor & McCathren 2003; Biemiller, 2003; Collins, 2005; Justice, Meier & Walpole, 2005; Walsh & Blewitt, 2006). Schickedanz (1999) claimed, "Of all the literacy experiences children can have during their preschool years, storybook reading seems to be the most powerful in helping them learn language and gain knowledge of the world" (p. 42). A storybook is valuable to children's early literacy development because it provides language-rich

contexts that build children's concept of print, develops their phonological awareness along with syntax of a language, and supplies them with knowledge of the world. Elley (1989) carried out a series of empirical studies showing that with support of book illustration and teacher's guidance, young children could learn new vocabulary incidentally in storybook reading. The study specifically indicated that the experimental group, which was read with explanation of novel words while encountering them in the storybook, gained significantly more vocabulary than the control group. Most valuably, storybook reading gives children opportunities to utilize decontextualized language to build literacy, especially the ability to comprehend and learn from text (Snow, 1991; Beck & McKeown, 2003); it also allows children to expose to words that are not normally heard in spoken language. In explaining what does decontextualized language mean, Schickedanz (1999) interpreted that when we read a story, the author is not talking to us in presence, and the actions and events are not happening in front of our eyes; therefore, in order to understand what is happening in a story, "the child must focus on the language more than he needs in real-life contexts, and this may promote language learning" (p. 54).

In given the notion that storybook reading supports children's literacy development, the phenomenon of the Matthew effect in reading is found in many cases. The concept was proposed by Stanovich (1986) in synthesizing the growing body of research on relationships between cognitive processes and reading ability. It demonstrates richer-get-richer and poorer-get-poorer patterns of reading achievement. As he illustrated, "The very children who are reading well and who have good vocabularies will read more, learn more word meanings, and hence read even better. Children with inadequate vocabularies—who read slowly and without enjoyment—read less, and as a result have slower development of vocabulary

knowledge, which inhibits further growth in reading ability” (p.381). Therefore, the Matthew effect in reading represents a reciprocal relationship between reading and vocabulary development. Interestingly, although many studies supported the Matthew effect in reading (Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Ewers & Brownson, 1999), another series of studies (Elley, 1989; Coyne, Kame’enui, Simmons & Stoolmiller 2004; Justice, Meier & Walpole, 2005) drew exciting implication that children with lower vocabulary gain most progress in vocabulary during storybook reading. They suggest that explicit teaching of novel words in story reading might narrow the vocabulary gap among students.

In spite of the strong linkage between storybook and children’s literacy development, more factors might contribute to the adult-children storybook reading. The frequency children are read to, the style of adult readers interacting with children during and after reading, children’s linguistic level, personal characteristics and background are called to attention (Neuharth-Pritchett, 2008).

On the other hand, literature dedicated to storybook application in Taiwan as EFL learning context springs. Quite a large number of studies examined the effectiveness and feasibility of using storybook to teach English (Tang, 2004; Liang, 2005; Lee, 2006). They showed positive outcome in both students’ improvement in English proficiency and their motivation toward English learning.

Form previous studies, there is strong evidence that storybook contributes to children’s language development, reading enjoyment, and love of literature. But if we want to make our teaching materials more useful, and time spends on teaching vocabulary more effective, it is needed to design our reading activities carefully and thoughtfully.

Effective Vocabulary Instruction Through Storybook Reading

How children acquire language and meaning from reading is complicated, but there is a tendency that children might be misled by book illustration and their own background knowledge (Leck & McKeown, 2001). Therefore, it is necessary to draw children's attention to the reading text. Through interaction between teachers and students, form-focused instruction allows children to draw their attention to linguistic forms and context (Ellis, 2001). Hargrave & Senechal (2000) also asserted that children's language development is enhanced when explanations of particular words, dialogues of target vocabulary, and questions of high-level thinking are included in reading. As we can see, questions that engage children in storybook reading are truly helpful.

Reading aloud is another strategy recommended to accompany storybook (McKeown & Beck 2005; Lane & Wright, 2007), especially for younger children and ones with low language ability. Reading aloud could be a powerful way to increase children's vocabulary, listening comprehension, syntactic knowledge, and word decoding skill. Since children's ability to detect sounds are more sensitive than adult, the advantage should be utilized to enhance their language learning.

Besides, elaborating new vocabulary by providing word explanation is found effective to children's novel word learning (Elley, 1989; Justice et al., 2005). In both Elley (1998), Penno, More and Wilkinson's (2002) study conducted with 5 to 8 year-old children in New Zealand demonstrated that storybook reading enhances children's word knowledge, but teacher's additional explanations of unknown words, through the use of synonym, role play, or illustrations can boost children's vocabulary learning even more. Justice, Meier and Walpole (2005) further explained children's vocabulary learning is a gradual process, and adult's input style could influence the

rate of novel word learning. Meanwhile, echoing ample L1 research on the effects of storybook reading to vocabulary acquisition, Collins (2005) conducted a study to see whether the result could be applied to L2 context. The study showed the treatment group (with explanation of target words) made a significant growth in new vocabulary learning from storybook reading. Both children with high and low level of language skills learned new words from teacher's help.

Moreover, repeated exposure seems important to children's verbal and written development of a language. Studies (Senechal, 1997; Elley 1989, Bellon & Oglftref, 2000) indicated that the number of times a particular word occurs in a storybook text or the frequency with which a storybook is read also affects word learning. In a sense, through repeated exposure of the same story, children can utilize and test their pre-acquired knowledge in later reading to learn new lexical items. Thus, repetition and children's active use of novel words promote their acquisition of the words (Temple & Snow, 2003).

Concluding the previous literature addressing children's language learning, reading storybook aloud to children repeatedly, talking about and questioning children through storybook reading accelerate children's language competence. With qualities of complementing children's language development, shared storybook reading is an effective instruction to scaffold children's vocabulary learning during reading. It is further explained in the next section.

Shared Storybook Reading

Shared storybook reading has been recommended to prompt children's oral and reading ability enjoyably and effectively. It is suggested that children can learn the meaning of unknown words through incidental exposure during shared storybook

reading (Whitehurst et al., 1988; Elley, 1989; Senechal & Cornell, 1993; Justice, 2002; Walsh, 2008). The special about book reading is that it constitutes a context which novel words can be explained by pictorial and textual support. From there adult can provide appropriate assistance to draw children's attention to the words and their referents (Temple & Snow, 2003); therefore, through questioning, commenting and praising, mature readers can engage children in reading context, and help them develop phonological awareness (Allor & McCathren 2003). To be more specifically, children's vocabulary learning could be facilitated by adult's introducing or use of novel words in the context (Justice, 2002). That is to say, vocabulary learning may be facilitated by adult's questions that lead children to use new words in answering them. Both children's general language and thinking skills are affected by adult's reading style (Walsh, 2008).

Another issue dealing with children's vocabulary learning during shared storybook reading is widely debated. Some studies (Whitehurst et. al, 1988; Senechal, 1997) suggest that adult questioning style which requires children to participate with higher cognitive level favors children's expressive (productive) word learning over receptive ones. But others prove divergently with the findings (Justice, 2002; Justice, Meier & Walpole, 2005) that children who were questioned with the similar questions did not obtain expressive vocabulary significantly over receptive vocabulary.

Therefore, in helping children building literacy, strategies are developed to work with shared story reading. For instance, the positive outcome of children's vocabulary gain has shown in dialogic reading (Whitehurst et al., 1988). It is a reading technique that uses language, feedback and adult-child interactions in picture book reading to facilitate young children's language development. In following the principle of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), parents and teachers in dialogic

reading program are trained to use “what” and open-ended questions, along with praise to encourage children to say just a little more than they would naturally do. On the other hand, Text Talk is another technique developed by Beck and Mckeown (2001) to work with reading aloud. It is an approach to enhance young children’s ability to build meaning from text in which the teacher enriches reading with open questions, discussions, and follows each story with explicit attention to vocabulary. The focus on the text is to avoid children responding to questions on the basis of the pictures and their background knowledge that reduces the opportunities to construct meaning from decontextualized language.

Other than reading strategies, adult’s reading styles have different effects on children’s language acquisition during shared storybook reading. Reese, Cox, Harte, and McAnally (2003) videotaped New Zealand mothers reading to young children and found three major reading types. They are describer (describing and labeling pictures), comprehender (focusing on story meaning and making inferences and predictions about story events), and performance-oriented reading styles (reading the story uninterrupted and confining discussion to before and after the story reading). The finding indicated children who were read with describer style outperformed the other two styles in vocabulary and comprehension test. Similar results are shown with American mothers reading to their children in the study done by Whitehurst et al. (1989). Mothers were trained to use dialogic reading strategy while reading. Results indicated that both labeling of words with pictures and questioning about vocabulary are effective for children’s learning of novel words. So we will focus the next part on labeling and questioning of vocabulary.

Labeling and Questioning of Novel Words

A growing body of research indicates that compared to only passive exposure to new words, adult's questions may promote children's novel word learning. Senechal (1997) compared how repeated reading, labeling (pointing a word with its illustration), and questioning of novel words (using what- or where-question) affected children's vocabulary acquisition. The study revealed that both repeated reading and questioning benefited children's vocabulary learning more significantly than single-labeling condition. Moreover, asking questions during repeated reading was more beneficial for expressive vocabulary. Ewers and Brownson (1999) followed Senechal's study and investigated how questioning of novel word affected 6-year-old children's vocabulary learning. Two groups consisting of children of high and low vocabulary level were assigned into active (questioning of target words) and passive group (recast of the sentence that has target words in it). The result showed children with both high and low vocabulary acquired novel words from one storybook reading alone; children in active group acquired significantly more words than passive group.

However, contradiction appears in some studies. Justice (2002) examined the influence of adults' questioning and labeling of novel words to preschoolers. She found labeling condition facilitated children's receptive vocabulary more than expressive vocabulary. What's more, Walsh and Blewitt (2006) suggested that types of question are not as important to word learning as children's active engagement in discussion about novel words in general.

Studies described above have demonstrated various effects of adult's questioning styles on children's vocabulary acquisition; possible effects on children's novel word learning with high and low vocabulary capacity are also discussed. However, given the benefits associated with shared storybook reading for facilitating children's

emergent literacy in L1 and L2, few studies have dealt with shared storybook reading and children's vocabulary learning in EFL elementary school. For this reason, the present study focuses on two vocabulary instructional skills, namely labeling and questioning of novel words, with shared storybook reading. Here, labeling refers to the technique that the teacher labels the target word with its corresponding illustration when encountering it during reading. And Questioning refers to the technique that the teacher uses *wh-* or *how* questions to invite students answering it with the target word.

Research Question

The present research is conducted to enrich shared storybook reading teaching activities with teacher's guided questions focusing on novel words encountered during reading. The research questions to be investigated are as follows:

- (1) How do the two techniques — labeling alone and a combination of questioning and labeling of novel words, influence children's vocabulary acquisition?
- (2) How do the two techniques — labeling alone and a combination of questioning and labeling of novel words, affect children's retention of vocabulary gain during shared storybook reading?
- (3) How do the two techniques — labeling alone and a combination of questioning and labeling of novel words, affect children with high English proficiency (HEP) and low English proficiency (LEP) in EFL context?