

## **Exploring Seventh Graders' Perceptions of the Picture-Word Inductive Model in their Narrative Writing in China**

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**Abstract:** In this exploratory study, the researcher interviewed 30 seventh graders in China about their perceptions of a new method, the Picture-Word Inductive Model (PWIM). The study found that participants welcomed PWIM and exemplified the positive influence of PWIM on their narrative writing.

China has the largest population of English learners and users now: approximately 440 million English-learning and English-using people (see Crystal, 2008), which is a result of the central educational policy of teaching English as a core and compulsory subject for decades. For those many years of teaching English in China, a strong instructional focus has been promoted on grammar, reading, and translation, with a method called “teacher-centered textbook-analysis-based grammar-translation” (Yang, 2000, p. 19). This traditional approach is not the only English teaching approach implemented in China nowadays, because the approach “has failed to develop an adequate level of communicative competence” (Hu, 2002, p.93) and the English learners and users in China need more competence and skills (e.g., writing, speaking, and communicative competence), principally due to economic, political, and social influences.

The Picture-word Inductive Model (PWIM), as a new English Language Teaching (ELT) approach that had never been used in China before, might be essential to the ongoing new English education because of its wide recognition and application in educational institutes in North America and Taiwan (Calhoun, 1999; Feng, 2011; Swartzendruber, 2007; Wong, 2009). This instructional approach potentially enables learners to manage the meaning and use of new words, empowers learners from passive learning to active and productive learning by expressing themselves using speaking or/and writing, and helps learners write up paragraphs step by step from adding up words, phrases and sentences.

In spite of its delicate narrations, true-to-life scenarios and wide popularity in other places than Mainland China, PWIM has its weaknesses in terms of research studies. Until now, there have been only a few research studies of PWIM (e.g., Calhoun, 1999; Feng, 2011; Joyce et al., 2009; Swartzendruber, 2007; Wong, 2009) since Calhoun’s (1999) research. In those research studies, PWIM is not the only intervention in the learners’ language development, so it cannot be inferred from the results that PWIM alone contributes to the learners’ language development. Moreover, the research studies of PWIM are even fewer when the studies are narrowed down to ESL or EFL learners. There is only one quantitative research study (Swartzendruber, 2007) and one qualitative research (Feng, 2011) found in the literature review, and none of them has been conducted with English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Mainland China.

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **English Teaching in China**

English teaching in China has its peculiar cultural, social and political context; moreover, China has experienced its own particular history of English textbooks and syllabi changes. Historically, English has been taught as a compulsory subject with a strong emphasis on grammar, translation, and reading, mainly through direct instruction approaches (Yang, 2000). Such traditional teaching approaches were characterized by systematic study of grammar,

extensive use of Chinese-English translation, and persistent memorization of syntactic patterns and vocabulary (Hu, 2002). Such has been the tradition for many years; however, the traditional approach has failed to develop EFL learners' communicative competence (i.e., the ability to use English for authentic verbal and textual communications—in other words, speaking and writing; Hu, 2002) well enough in China. Millions of EFL learners taught by this traditional approach were able to read, but not to speak or write well (Wei & Su, 2012). As a result, new English teaching approaches, focusing on bridging reading with writing and transforming learners from passive to active agents, have recently entered Chinese classrooms. This trend may be observed as a shift in the education policy.

In 2001, the National Academy of Education Administration in China (NAEA), known as the highest education authority in China, issued and mandated a policy that the age for compulsory English be lowered from 11 to nine years old (Nunan, 2003). According to the official rhetoric, students in secondary schools should have five or six 45-minute English lessons every week (Nunan, 2003). The suitably qualified teachers mentioned in this regulation referred to Chinese English teachers with formal English teaching education (Wang, Lin, & Spalding, 2008). Secondary English teachers received a credential in English education from four-year colleges or universities (Wang et al., 2008).

### **Picture-Word Inductive Model**

PWIM is a teaching approach based on Calhoun's (1999) research on early literacy. The fundamental tenet of PWIM is its use of "pictures as a stimulus for language experience activities" in classrooms to teach young students learning to read and write (Joyce, Weil, & Calhoun, 2009, p. 130). Calhoun (1999) suggested that PWIM be used to teach several skills as an integrated whole simultaneously, beginning with the phonetic and structural components of language—for example, the pronunciation and the spelling of a word. Students using PWIM see the item, listen to the teacher's pronunciation, and then pronounce the word to reinforce word recognition. PWIM also covers explicit instruction and induction, as well as an immediate assessment of students' needs and comprehension. Calhoun (1999) suggested that a teacher can arrange any individual activity, as well as small-group and large-group activities, with a PWIM format. She also suggested that PWIM can be modified and applied to older students (Calhoun, 1999).

**PWIM in class.** PWIM has many successful scenarios in classrooms (Calhoun, 1999; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Joyce et al., 2009). Calhoun (1999) stated that its successful applications were closely related to prescribed and detailed steps for implementation, an instructional sequence incorporating cycling and recycling through the 10 instructional steps (See Appendix A).

**Vocabulary learning through pictures.** PWIM embraces the development of visual perceptions, which was vital to children's literacy acquisition (Astorga, 1999; Clay, 2001; Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 2002). Joyce and Weil (2009) showed how pictures may serve as important stimuli for connecting learners' life experiences to their language learning in the classroom. The teacher writes each identified word on chart paper outside the picture and draws a line from the word to the item in the picture, essentially creating a picture-word dictionary which the students could employ to connect words with corresponding pictures. Joyce and Weil suggested that such a kind of connection contributed to developing new ideas and learning vocabulary.

Wong (2009) demonstrated that vocabulary learning is also achieved through connections via dual channels of speaking and writing. "Shaking out" the words from pictures (i.e., writing

words around the pictures and drawing lines to link words with identified objects) and spelling the words brings “awareness to the letters in the word and connection between the spoken words onto written text” (Wong, 2009, p. 9). Reading aloud, spelling out, and writing down these words on the picture-word dictionary is the first step for children to know the phonetic and morphological form of the words. After they become more familiar with this mode of instruction, they start to write phrases, short sentences and later long ones about the pictures independently or with the assistance of teachers and more competent peers. This writing process involves learning form, meaning and use of those words. Gradually, these vocabularies are stored, as Calhoun (1999) suggests, in students’ long-term memory and become a part of their prior knowledge, which is used to learn new words.

**Thinking inductively.** Inquiry-oriented induction is another key feature of PWIM. Inductive thinking or induction promotes learners’ awareness of language development (Astorga, 1999; Clay, 2001; Joyce et al., 2002). Induction in PWIM refers to developing new ideas through building parallelism among unrelated information, ideas, and artifacts (Joyce et al., 2004). This type of thinking helps students notice and infer with patterns and relationships within the language—elements which should enable them to apply and transfer such learning to novel words. They also suggest that such induction empowers students to generalize language rules—for example, how to structure sentences on the basis of words and phrases. Students may draw generalizations after numerous PWIM activities by cycling and recycling the sequences mentioned above.

**Resistance and unpreparedness of English teachers using PWIM.** PWIM is not representative of the existing repertoire of most Chinese English teachers. Historically, Chinese philosophy has established inductive logic in terms of analogical reasoning (Tang, 1997); nevertheless, there is currently no logic class in public education. Nor is there a Chinese philosophy class (except for one called Marxism philosophy) for education majors in universities. Hence, Chinese English teachers have not been accustomed to thinking inductively, which is a key component in PWIM. Chinese English teachers might lack cognitive readiness with specific regard to PWIM (Wang et al., 2008).

With the empirical and contextual gaps mentioned above, the problem of this study was to explore young EFL learners’ perceptions of PWIM to their narrative writing in China. The research question was: What are seventh graders’ perceptions of PWIM when applied to their narrative writing in China? The purpose of this study was to inform educational officials and English educators in China about PWIM as a newly-tried ELT method from learners’ perspectives, so that the leaders and practitioners can consider PWIM as a new teaching approach to be introduced and implemented widely in Mainland China, thus possibly enhancing the current teaching methodology in terms of helping learners acquire English literacy, develop inductive thinking and enhance narrative writing level effectively.

### **Method**

The primary goal of the study was to explore young EFL learners’ perceptions of PWIM to their narrative writing in China. To achieve this goal, I chose an exploratory case study as my research design. Case study is an “intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). In this study, “a single entity” (Merriam, 1998, p. 27) refers to the young EFL learners. They share the same cultural and educational background, having been educated in school in a similar way, in a “bounded system” (Stake, 2005, p. 444).

### **Participants**

In the current study, I employed a purposive sampling to select participants for this study

through oral exchanges. The eligible participants were early adolescents in middle schools, who knew how to read and write in Chinese and in English already, started to learn how to write narrations in English and had PWIM trial sessions. The participants were in grade seven at the age of 12 from a public secondary school in China. They were all Chinese. All participants had already received four years of formal English education. Most of them started to learn English earlier in various English training centers or in even private kindergartens (equivalent to pre-school in the United States). They started to learn narrative writing in English from grade seven. The seventh graders received five 45-minute English lessons every week.

### **Recruitment**

After all of the PWIM trial sessions in the class, I explained the research study and the interview protocol. I asked who wanted to participate and then handed out child assent forms, as well as parent consent forms afterwards to each hand-raising student. I asked each of the student to take the two forms in Chinese, read them carefully, and explain to their parents to get their parents' signature. Participants were made aware of the process, the nature and procedures of the study, as well as the estimated time period for each interview, before they signed the consent forms. I also notified my participants' and their custodians that they had the right to say "no" to the form, and that they could decide not to let their children participate at any time during the process of collecting data for any reason, without consequences. By this process, I had 30 (14 male and 16 female) seventh graders for the interviews. I guaranteed my participants' confidentiality during and after the research study; thus, I gave each of them a pseudonym to protect their identity.

### **Procedures**

I interviewed all of my participants in Chinese one-to-one using a digital recording. As a former student in public schools in China, I recognized the discipline of routinized school life, so I proposed a maximum of 10 minutes for each interview and my contextualized proposal got approved. During class breaks, self-learning classes, and minor classes (i.e., geography, physical exercise, and other classes apart from Chinese, Math or English), I pulled out those seventh grades one by one and interviewed them respectively. All of the participants were asked to omit identifiable information. The interviews provided rich description (Creswell, 2007).

### **Data Analysis**

According to Merriam (2002), "data analysis is simultaneous with data collection" (p. 14). Due to tight schedule of interviews with seventh graders, I analyzed collected interview data roughly during data collection. As Stake (2005) stated, analysis refers to giving meaning to first impressions of those texts. I wrote down my first impressions on a blank page when I listened to the first interviewees' audios.

However, I framed new questions for the following interviews as a result of what had been found from the previous audios (Seidman, 2006). I avoided "in-depth analysis of the interview data" until I finished all the interviews, because I tried not to "impose meaning from one participant's interview on the next" (Seidman, 2006, p. 113). Hence I minimized "imposing on the generative" and inductive process of the interviews (Seidman, 2006, p. 113).

After all of the interviews, I transcribed them via listening to the recording and typing every word. Then their answers were translated from Chinese into English. After that, I conducted the coding by writing my first thoughts on the margins of the transcript in order to read through literal words. Different color highlights were used to categorize the coding. The coding categories were words and phrases which represented the regularities, patterns and topics my data covered (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I categorized coding in order to find concepts and

patterns and developed them into themes through thematic analysis to help answer the research question. To write up, I threaded my draft with themes, categorized answers and evidence from those analyzed data.

### **Researcher's Role**

I am an EFL/ESL learner and a former English instructor in China with doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction with specialty in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). I was also the PWIM trainer of the participants' English teacher and researcher. My bias toward how my participants perceived PWIM before this study was that the traditional ELT cannot meet their needs and that their minds must be open enough to receive new methods. However, I was uncertain about whether PWIM was effective. To address my bias, I encouraged the participants to compare the traditional ELT method and PWIM, and prompted participants during the interview to explain their experiences of new ELT methods if any, and critique their strengths and weaknesses.

### **Findings**

The following findings are displayed to tell each participant's perceptions about PWIM in their narrative writing.

#### **What is Narrative Writing to Them?**

Xu liked English narrative writing more than Chinese argumentative writing, because the former was short and made up of everyday words. The topics were about personal experience, for instance, festivals and hobbies. He had pictures in his mind during his writing, and he believed that he could retrieve these pictures and use words conveniently. As a result, he believed his writing after the PWIM trial would have more words and be more descriptive than before.

#### **Better Narrative Writing from PWIM and in PWIM**

Many seventh graders talked about how PWIM helped them write more and better, when they were asked to write at the end of each PWIM circle. Zhang expressed such help in detail: "My English teacher would teach us some new extracurricular words when we wrote and needed the words to make sentences. We would use those extracurricular words when we need to write similar sentences in tests."

**Direct instruction and corrections.** Zhang cherished the writing stage as a moment for her to grasp more vocabulary in both meaning and use. She also considered the post-writing class demonstration as a precious opportunity for self-correction and peer learning:

I liked the writing stage, when I can use those newly learned words, consolidate my grammar and learn more language knowledge from my peers through their writings...Moreover, [the] teacher may correct you when you read erroneous expressions from your writing, which leads to your improvement in tests later on.

He, another interviewee, also cherished writing practice in PWIM, because he could use words directly in the writing stage and learn more words by asking teachers, when thinking of some unknown words. Both Zhang and He mentioned direct instruction and correction from their English teacher. Li pointed it out that such correction created a pressure-free atmosphere, compared to test writing, because her English teacher would correct any student without any point-deduction consequences. This gave Li a good chance of internalizing her teacher's instructed knowledge, such as the differences among "What else do you do?", "What else do you like doing?" and "What do you like to do?" Zhang even gave an instance that she heard and noticed some grammatical usages from her peers which she remembered later and would use in future tests, although Zhang could not recall what the usages were during interview. Guo also

mentioned the demonstration time (i.e. their final presentation of what they had written) when he monitored and reflected on his own writing, because of his habitual structural problems in making sentences. When he heard others read their writing at the end of PWIM, he could check his own writing errors and made corrections correspondingly.

**Peer learning.** Peer learning happened when students shared their writings by reading them out. Zhang preferred learning from her peers' writings to her teacher's instruction, because she felt such a learning approach was so interesting and she could remember the shared knowledge more deeply. Zhu shared the same preference with Zhang: "Individual writings from my classmates are unique and worthy to learn." Wu also spoke highly of peer learning because she could learn from others' writings, regarding both how to write a narration and what to write about. She could imitate her peers' and then write better. Chen stated that she learned from others' mistakes in her peers' writings, and some of them were common to every student.

**Characteristics of better writing.** Jiang expressed that he improved his writing in tests, with better grammar, sentence structure, and word choice. He asserted that he had better writing because he had memorized more words in a lively and figurative way through PWIM. The word-picture dictionary, as a teaching tool in PWIM, gave him chance to read those words after class and thus help him retain these lexical knowledge. He even used a small notebook to write down words (not only meaning and spelling, but also use and category) to memorize more. In addition to correct grammar and sentence structure, Liu and Zhu talked about the benefits of PWIM to their writings, saying that they could write more sentences and write them with more fluidity and flowingness, rather than the previous moments of stopping to think and feeling nothing more to write. Zhu asserted that he was more descriptive and could reach the minimum word requirement easily, thanks to PWIM. Because of PWIM, Huang could have a framework of writing before she started to write, because when she saw a topic, she would immediately have pictures in her brain, and those images came from her imagination, her textbook and her previous life experiences.

**Connections of words to compose.** Sun attributed closer connections of words to PWIM in her writing. Sun said that PWIM enabled her to connect seemingly random words when she wrote. Liu gave a similar statement by saying PWIM could help her connect previously learned words during writing. Liu thanked writing practice in PWIM for giving students the chance to review words, which deepened their memory of those words. Sun, furthermore, gave an example of a PWIM picture with a house and children. She had an image of going home; thus, she wrote "Children go home after school. They run home, happily." She liked to put herself into her own self-made stories when she saw pictures. Zhu also developed a habit of having an image when he saw a writing topic. He also felt his writing became more smooth and flowing.

**Affective benefits of PWIM to writing.** Gong talked about affective benefits of PWIM to his writing. He admitted he was introverted and did not feel comfortable expressing himself in public, especially using English. PWIM allowed shy students like him to learn more words in terms of meaning, spelling and use, so he could write better and feel more confident in writing in English. He said that introverted students could and would use writing to express their thoughts more comfortably in written English. Li said that she started to write in Chinese in Grade 4 and in English in Grade 7. The writing stage in PWIM gave her a chance to write her own thoughts and knowledge, and she had a strong sense of satisfaction in the process.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This exploratory case study has revealed that PWIM was perceived to have a positively academic and affective influence on the participants' narrative writing or on their English learning in general. My participants found that they could write better narrations in terms of quantity and quality. They also felt that they were more confident and competent about narrative writings, thanks to PWIM.

### **Recommendations**

ELT educators and policymakers in China may consider introducing PWIM because of its great impact on students. Furthermore, when introducing these new methods, they should consider contextual factors, such as English teachers' professional development (to build up their constant exposure to, awareness of and strategic readiness for new teaching approaches), and English learners' level of readiness and reluctance.

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### **Appendix A**

Calhoun's 10 instructional steps of PWIM:

1. Select a picture.
2. Ask students to identify what they see in the picture.
3. Label the picture parts identified. (Draw a line from the identified object or area, say the word, write the word; ask students to spell the word aloud and then to pronounce it.)
4. Read and review the picture word chart aloud.
5. Ask students to read the words (using the lines on the chart if necessary) and to classify the words into a variety of groups. Identify common concepts (e.g., beginning consonants, rhyming words) to emphasize with the whole class.
6. Read and review the picture word chart (say the word, spell it, say it again).

7. Add words, if desired, to the picture word chart and to the word banks.
8. Lead students into creating a title for the picture word chart. Ask students to think about the information on the chart and what they want to say about it.
9. Ask students to generate a sentence, sentences, or a paragraph about the picture word chart. Ask students to classify sentences; model putting the sentences into a good paragraph.
10. Read and review the sentences and paragraphs (Calhoun, 1999, p. 23).