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# English through Chinese: experimenting with sandwich stories

JI YUHUA

A novel and dynamic approach to teaching English by starting  
in Chinese

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STARTING in September 2001, all primary schools in the People's Republic of China, except those in the countryside, have begun to offer EFL lessons to their third graders and above. This decision of the Ministry of Education seeks to prepare its young citizens better for the novel challenges of China's membership of the World Trade Organization.

In educationally developed areas like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other big cities, many schools start teaching EFL to their first graders (aged 6–7). However, EFL textbooks for young learners in China are in most cases demotivating, in that they are neither interesting nor intellectually challenging. Children have to repeat words and sentences that are meaningless to them. Take reading for example. They learn to read EFL not by reading but by going through mechanical drills in letters, words and phonic skills, ways that Smith (1984:11) calls 'easy ways to make learning to read difficult'. Smith (1984, 1997) asserts that 'children learn to read only by reading'. But there is a Catch-22 situation here: to learn to read, you have to read, but you cannot read if you have not learned to read. This situation is, however, being tackled by a new experimental approach over the past five years – a 'sandwich story' methodology (cf. Ji 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b; Ji & Xu 1999, 2000a, 2000b).

The use of sandwich stories is based partly on the assumption that the unknown can be understood only on the basis of what you already know, and partly on the famous, albeit seemingly pointless, guideline proposed by Smith (1984:23): 'The only way to make learning to read easy is to make reading easy.' Echo-

ing Smith, this paper argues that the only way to make EFL learning easy is to make the learning easy. The account that follows includes: an exposition of what sandwich stories are and how they are produced; a justification and a historical account of the sandwich method; a description of the sandwich story experiments in China, followed by a few samples of sandwich stories used in the experiments; and finally a discussion of, the results of and responses to, these experiments.

## What is a sandwich story?

A sandwich story is one that is written or told with target language items embedded ('sandwiched') in the student's mother tongue. For those who do not know Chinese, I would like to illustrate what such a story looks like by giving a reversed version of a part of the story of Little Red Riding Hood, in which the target language is Chinese while the mother tongue is English.

Little Red Riding Hood asked, 'Oh, Nainai, how come your yanjing are so big?' Lang answered, 'My yanjing are very big so that I can see you clearly.' Little Red Riding Hood asked, 'Oh, Nainai, how come your erduo are so long?'

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Lang answered, 'My erduo are very long so that I can hear you clearly.' Little Red Riding Hood asked, 'Oh, Nainai, how come your yachi are so sharp?' Lang answered, 'My yachi are very sharp so that I can eat you up quickly.'

It is easy to imagine how quickly the hearer/reader finds out about the meanings of the target language items of *nainai* ('granny'), *yanjing* ('eye/s'), *lang* ('wolf'), *erduo* ('ear/s'), and *yachi* ('tooth/teeth').

### **How does one make sandwich stories?**

Both western and oriental stories are chosen as raw material for sandwich processing if they prove to be educational, entertaining, and developmentally appropriate. Then begins the preparation of the sandwich in a cumulative, step-by-step manner: the percentage of EFL items increases story by story, from 1–2% to over 90%. On average, new EFL items per story are introduced at a controlled rate of 8 during the beginning stage (25 stories), 10 during the middle stage (20 stories), and 16 during the final stage (20 stories), after which stories are produced completely in English (for details, see Ji 2000).

Choice of EFL items is made in accordance with the principles of learnability and prominence (Ji, 1998b, 1999, 2000). Learnability refers to the degree of ease with which an English item is acquired by Chinese children. Learnability estimates involve such considerations as:

#### *Phonological transferability*

Items composed of sounds or sound patterns similar to those of Chinese are taught earlier than those containing dissimilar sounds and sound patterns.

#### *Grammatical similarity*

The simple present, the simple future, and the present continuous tenses and the active voice are taught earlier than the others; and phrases or sentences with a word order similar to that of Chinese are taught earlier than more distinctively English ones.

#### *Lexical commonality*

Content words are taught earlier than function words (the opposite of Burling's sequencing:

1968, 1978), and expressions common to both Chinese and English, such as *go to hospital* are taught earlier than those reflecting different conceptualizations, such as *go to see a doctor*, whose equivalent in Chinese, translated literally, would be *go to see sickness*.

#### *Cultural acceptability*

Culturally neutral terms are introduced earlier than those loaded with typically Western cultural meanings. Prominence, which is different from frequency – the number of times that an English item appears in the story or in the corpus – has to do with the importance of a specific item (e.g., *eye*, *ear*, *teeth*, *wolf*, *granny*) to the development of the story to be used (e.g., *Little Red Riding Hood*). In the story *Little Red Riding Hood*, however, prominent as the name of the heroine is, it is not chosen as a target language item because of phonological and conceptual complexity (see the example above).

### **How did the sandwich method come about?**

The sandwich method by which sandwich stories are produced is not new. Chinese parents who use a dialect with their children as their first 'language' have intuitively used the method to teach them to speak Mandarin (Ji 1998a, 1999, 2000). I used this method to teach my 4-year-old daughter, who reacted strongly against my efforts with the immersion method. Taking advantage of the fact that she enjoyed listening to me read aloud stories in Mandarin, I started to 'smuggle in' some English in my oral interpretations, beginning from 1–2% and on to 60% until a story could be told and understood almost completely in English.

Also known as *code-switching* or *diglot-weave* (see Blair, 1991:29), or the *bilingual method* (Morgan & Rinvolucri 1986:37), the sandwich method has been in use for foreign language teaching for at least 30 years. Robins Burling (1968, 1978, 1982) is best known for the promotion of this method. From the 1960s, he developed a diglot-weave model for teaching reading in French. In the 1970s, Rudy Lentulay, a professor of Russian at Bryn Mawr University in the US, inspired by the British writer Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* (in which the teenage characters use Russian words as slang) used this method to teach young children oral Russian (quoted in Blair 1991:29). Morgan

and Rinvoluceri also got the idea of using bilingual texts from reading this book, and 'have found it an excellent way of getting beginners gradually to assimilate new vocabulary by setting it in a context that has not been denatured' (p.36). A good, sustained example in German and English is Werner Lansburgh's novel *Dear Doosie* (quoted, *ibid*:37).

Ray Tongue, in the 1970s and 80s, also used this method to teach Bahasa Indonesia to English speakers who had to learn to read this language fast for church work (Burling 1978:105; Mario Rinvoluceri, personal communication, June 10, 1998). It has been found particularly effective 'for those who are aiming at a reading knowledge of English' (Morgan & Rinvoluceri 1986:37). Experiments in China have shown that it works equally well enabling children to speak English.

### Why sandwich stories?

'You can bring a student to a book but you cannot make him read' (Kay 1965:80). The reason for this is obvious: the book might be either uninteresting or incomprehensible. It would be a quite different story if the book were a book of stories at the right level of difficulty and interest. 'Learning is nothing but the endeavor to make sense, and the effort to teach or to inform, therefore, can be nothing but an endeavor to be interesting and comprehensible' (Smith 1997:viii). The use of stories as an effective way to motivate children to learn a second language needs no verification (see, e.g., Garvie 1990; Pedersen 1995). As Wright (1995:5) observes, 'We all need stories for our minds as much as we need food for our bodies – Stories are particularly important in the lives of our children... Children's hunger for stories is constant. Every time they enter your classroom they enter with a need for stories.'

Current EFL textbooks for Chinese primary children, in most cases, prove uninteresting. However, with a target of 400–600 words for primary EFL education, textbook writers are hardly to blame. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to produce anything interesting and intellectually challenging with such a limited vocabulary. Jacobs and Tunnell (1996:30) have, in fact, asked the very question: 'Can an author write a book with rigidly controlled vocabulary and an interesting story at the same time?' Their answer is: 'It is unlikely because a book can't serve two mas-

ters – the one more important to the author almost always takes over.' A story or text, therefore, seems to serve either those who read it to learn the language in which it is written, or those who read it for enjoyment, but never both. Yet, sandwich stories work wonders, making one book serve, indeed, two masters, and motivating students to learn English by making textbook materials enjoyable yet at the same time language-focused.

### Sandwich story experiments in China

In the past five years, sandwich story experiments have been conducted mainly in the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. There used to be three types of experimental classes (for details see Ji 1999), but now there are only two: Type I classes with children aged 4–5 and Type II classes with children aged 6–7. A typical sandwich class is conducted through the following steps:

- 1 Revision: The teacher helps review the EFL items covered in the previous story either:
  - *Mostly in Guangdong* having the children act out the story with the teacher as the narrator and each child playing the part of a story character (as in the case of small classes with 10–15 pupils), or (as in big classes with 30–50 pupils) with a group of children acting as one character, such as the first little pig, so that every child gets a chance to practice without taking up too much of the limited class time; or
  - *Mostly in Fujian* by retelling the story with such techniques as 'intentional deviation' (e.g., 'The first little pig built a house of bricks.'). 'information gaps' (e.g., 'The wolf first came to which little pig's house?'), 'translation mistakes' (e.g., 'The wolf shouted, "Open the door!" – The word door means 'house'. Am I right?'), and 'pretend forgetfulness' (e.g., 'Oh, granny, how come your – sorry, I forget the English word for [the teacher points at his/her eyes]').
- 2 Listening to the story: While the pupils listen to the new story on a stereo, the teacher often acts out the dramatic parts of the story.
- 3 Discussion: After the story is over, the teacher talks about the moral of the story usually by asking questions. This is the most communicative part of the sandwich class, though the whole session is characterized by

**Excerpt from sandwich story: The tree is not straight  
(face second page)**

1a

He runs for seven hours. He is very tired. Next morning, he comes into a wood. He sees an old man working in the wood. The old man is using a rope 把一棵长弯了的 young tree 拉直了, 然后把 rope 的另一头系在一棵比较粗的 tree 上。The little boy 感到很奇怪, 连忙问 the old man: "Why do you do that?" The old man 回答说: "Because the tree is not straight." The little boy 说: "Not straight 有什么关系? The tree is very young. When the tree grows up, it will be straight." The old man 说: "No, my dear boy. This tree will never be straight if I don't make it straight now."



From Ji & Xu, 2001, p.48



**Excerpt from sandwich story: Open the door!**

wolf 躺在床上，差一点忘了自己是在装 dead，刚想说“请进来吧”，又赶紧捂住自己的嘴巴。rabbit 在门外等了一会儿，没有听到任何动静，于是就轻轻地 open the door。哎，wolf 果真躺在床上。聪明的 rabbit 没有马上走到 wolf 的床前，它站在离门口不远的地方说：“我听说，如果一只 wolf 已经 dead，它的嘴巴一定是 open 的。”

communicativeness. Children shout and argue about what the hero/heroine should or should not have done, what the story told them about life, and how different the story would be if a certain plot element is reversed, etc.

- 4 Consolidation: The teacher goes over the new EFL items by miming or showing pictures and such real objects as chairs, bowls, knives, apples, etc. Then s/he asks the pupils to translate words, phrases, and sentences from Chinese to English or read after them. Sometimes, a song or rhyme is taught to enhance the pupils' memory of the new English items, e.g., for the story 'The Three Little Pigs' a song is sung to the tune of 'London Bridge is Falling Down', which goes like this:

'Little pig, open the door, open the door, open the door.

Big wolf, wo men jue bu gei ni ('we will never for you') open the door.

Wo men de (our) house jiu shi lao (is strong).

Big wolf chui bu dao (can't blow it down).

Big wolf weiba zhao liao ta wang jia pao (tail is burning he has to run home).

In Guangdong, most sandwich story classes are run on a story-drama basis, i.e., a small performance is put on after each story is learned. So after Step 4, there is a fifth step: Rehearsal, in which the teacher and the pupils discuss and decide who is/are to play which role in a story. Then the teacher helps with the rehearsal to prepare for Step 1(1) described above. In Fujian, however, most classes are run from Steps 1(2) to 4, with the rehearsal step postponed till after 8–10 stories are learned. Then there comes a long rehearsal period (2 to 3 weeks) followed by a drama festival in which the pupils act out the stories in a more formal and 'professional' way.

### The role of the mother tongue

The Sandwich-Story Method (SSM) makes good use of the mother tongue in EFL education for children. Through our experimentation, we have identified six roles that the mother tongue can play in EFL education for Chinese children, as follows:

- 1 It resolves the conflict between the young learner's interests and the comprehensibility of the EFL input. Interest results from comprehension. It is impossible to get someone interested in listening to your story

if s/he cannot understand you at all.

- 2 It brings about maximum class participation. Beginners hate activities that require them to speak only English. By allowing them to use their mother tongue whenever their English is inadequate, we ensure active class participation.
- 3 It enhances the young learner's self-confidence. Children no longer suffer from the anxiety arising from their inability to express themselves completely in English.
- 4 It serves as a bridge to authentic English materials. The percentage of EFL in children's 'sandwich interlanguage' keeps increasing.
- 5 It helps with the cognitive development of young learners. The Chinese and EFL lexicons within the brain of the young learner will be semantically and associationally linked and later integrated in a network, where the two lexical systems are connected both within and across the first and second languages through a language-independent conceptual representation.
- 6 It helps children to develop bilingually. Children benefit from sandwich stories in their development in both English and Chinese.

### Discussion

More than five years of experimentation with the sandwich method in Guangdong and Fujian has met with general approval. Teachers and parents are happy to see the young learners, after class, spend more time listening to their English recordings and reading their English books. And they have noticed a remarkable difference between 'sandwich class' pupils and 'non-sandwich class' pupils in the degree of willingness to use English in their everyday conversations. 'They never open their mouths' is a frequently heard complaint from parents of 'non-sandwich class' children. From the responses collected from 107 pupils' parents who completed our questionnaire (see Panel 2) on the relationship between method/textbooks and children's interest in EFL, we found children enjoyed SSM more than other methods/textbooks.

The accompanying table shows the difference between SSM and X. (X stands for other methods/textbooks, whose names, for ethical reasons, are not mentioned here.)

However, doubt has been raised about the legitimacy of this method in terms of

## Excerpt from sandwich story: The wolf runs away

1c



三个小时过去了，还是没有一条 fish 来咬 wolf's tail。这时，远处来了一个 farmer，他手里拿着一根扁担。farmer 看见河面上坐着一只 wolf，举起扁担朝 wolf 冲过来。wolf 一看吓坏了，想站起来 run away，可没想到自己的 tail 已经冻在冰上，它怎么站也站不起来。那个举着扁担的 farmer 马上就要跑过来了，wolf 急了，它猛劲一站，啪嚓，坏了，tail 被拔断了。疼得它嗷嗷直叫，赶紧 run away。

62

From Ji & Xu, 1999, p.62

## A questionnaire for relationship between methods/textbooks and children's interest in EFL (completed by parents)

Thank you very much for agreeing to fill in this questionnaire. First, please tell us what method or textbooks does your child's EFL teacher use. Tick one of the following:

Sandwich story methodology (SSM) ( ) or X (methods/textbooks other than SSM ( ).

1. Does your child read his/her EFL textbooks on his/her own initiative at home?  
**a.** Very often [3 points] **b.** Often [2 points] **c.** Occasionally [1 point] **d.** Never [0 point]
2. Does your child listen to his/her EFL textbook recordings on his/her own initiative at home?  
**a.** Very often **b.** Often **c.** Occasionally **d.** Never
3. Does your child say something like "I'm so happy because I'm going to my EFL class tomorrow" at home?  
**a.** Very often **b.** Often **c.** Occasionally **d.** Never
4. On his/her way to the EFL class, is your child usually happy?  
**a.** Very happy **b.** A little happy **c.** A little unhappy **d.** Very unhappy
5. Is your child very happy when his/her EFL class is cancelled due to an emergency?  
**a.** Very unhappy **b.** A little unhappy **c.** A little happy **d.** Very happy
6. In his/her daily life, does your child often use the EFL words he/she has learned from his/her EFL teacher?  
**a.** Very often **b.** Often **c.** Occasionally **d.** Never
7. Does your child often blurt out some sentences he/she has learned from his/her EFL teacher?  
**a.** Very often **b.** Often **c.** Occasionally **d.** Never
8. Does your child often ask you to tell him/her how to say this or that in English?  
**a.** Very often **b.** Often **c.** Occasionally **d.** Never

Number of pupils	More than 20 points	15–19 points	10–14 points	Less than 9 points	Average score
	Very Good	Good	Ordinary		
SSM Classes (54)	20 (37%)	23 (42.6%)	8 (14.8%)	3 (5.6%)	17.5
X Classes (53)	4 (7.5%)	11 (20.8%)	21 (39.6%)	17 (32.1%)	11.8

authenticity. There are indeed people 'who fear that taking such liberties can only lead to a 'pidginized' corruption of the authentic language' (Blair, 1991, p.30). After all, a sentence such as 'I want to chi diao ni' (Ji, 1998a), where *chi diao ni* means 'eat you up' in Mandarin, is anything but authentic. But the sandwich-method experimenters in China are encouraged by the following three facts:

- 1 The pupils are happy and so are their parents, who are often heard to say that the new methodology gives their children far

more than just English and a positive feeling towards English.

- 2 The pupils are enthusiastic about piecing together the bits of English they learn from the sandwich stories. Sentences like "I want to go to bed," "I don't like Sly Fox," and "My father is tall and strong," are created and produced as whole chunks by the pupils who have not learnt them in previous sandwich stories yet.
- 3 Some of the pupils have happily crossed the sandwich bridge to a new world of storyland where mono-lingual EFL stories are provided



with a beginning vocabulary of 700–1,000 words (Ji 2000).

There are also teachers who question the prospect of developing children's communicative competence through sandwich stories. However, our sandwich experiments seem to have confirmed the following three arguments:

- 1 Since sandwich stories are motivating, children learn the embedded EFL items with ease and in large quantities. As children acquire more and more words and their sentences grow from sandwich to monolingual (completely in English), and from short to long, their ability to express themselves in English increases. As to communication, it should not be regarded as something that Chinese children have to learn afresh. They know, for example, how to be polite, how to get information, how to persuade others, how to describe, how to introduce themselves. It is English words and ways of putting words together that they don't know. With words well understood and practiced, they certainly know how to do things with words. Their initial English sentences might not be idiomatic or native-like, being stripped of grammatical morphemes and function words similar to the first sentences produced by their English-speaking (though younger) counterparts, but they are never far from their communicative intent, be it a request, apology, command or exclamation.
- 2 Stories to children are as real as, or even more real than, reality. They actively take part in dramatizing the stories they hear, prolonging and adding more details to the stories. They are highly motivated to talk and shout. This kind of talking, albeit in a sandwich way most of the time, is everything but artificial. It has both intent and content for communication, two of the most important components of communication (Harmer, 1982). If communicative competence is acquired best through communication, it follows that children stand a good chance of developing their English communicative competence through talking about and acting out their sandwich stories, in which the percentage of English increases till it reaches over 90 %.
- 3 Stories, no matter how old or how fictional, are the best vehicle for teaching everyday

language. For example, much of the dialogue between the three little pigs and the men who carried straw, wood and bricks respectively, can be used by children when asking for help today. The same is true of the dialog between the Town Mouse and the Country Mouse when children express their likes and dislikes. Such examples are innumerable.

## Conclusion

SSM seems to have done the 'unlikely' job (Jacobs & Tunnell, 1996:30) pretty well: making one book serve two masters. It has proved to be a practical solution to the problem of motivation in EFL education for children. Yet, we must admit that SSM serves only as a bridge. It is, however, a safe and happy bridge. At the other end of the bridge are stories written completely in English. Before children cross this bridge, they speak unidiomatic English, code-switching back and forth between Chinese and English. This may seem a fatal flaw in SSM. But, to continue with the metaphor, just as the function of a bridge is primarily to help travelers to go from one place to another without running the risk of being drowned, so it is the function of sandwich stories to help young learners of EFL go from monolingual (only Chinese) to bilingual (both Chinese and English) without any risk of having their interests killed by boredom and difficulty. ■

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## FROM OUR FILES

### Cavalier tactics

The Taliban's key vehicle is the pickup truck. Impressed with the cross-country performance of pickups during the war with the Soviets, the militia chose the pickup as its main combat vehicle. Taleban militiamen – each truck carries about ten – fire from the back while on the move. "The result has been the creation of a unique force of pickup-mounted cavalry," wrote Ali Ahmad Jalali, a former colonel in the Afghan army, in the spring issue of *Parameters*, the U.S. Army's senior professional journal.

– *Time*, 8 Oct 01.

### Londonistan

But the weakest link, several French antiterrorist sources concur, is the protection that British civil liberties provide extremist movements. In addition to the often chilling rhetoric voiced by U.K.-based fundamentalists, their religious operations are cited by the French as instrumental in the radicalization process of many Continental recruits – including Zacarias Moussaoui, a French national now held in the U.S. as a suspect in attacks there. Like Moussaoui, many Muslims are radicalized in the fundamentalist mosques of Baker Street and Finsbury Park. And, like Moussaoui, so many volunteers to the bin Laden cause use the British capital as a base between visits to Afghan camps that French antiterrorist officials now call the city "Londonistan."

– *Time*, 8 Oct 01, p. 63.

Continued on page 62