

Original Paper

Document Title: A Practical Study on Cultivating Imagination through Educational Theatre in Primary School Chinese Reading Instruction for Years 5-6

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Abstract

Primary school Chinese reading instruction bears the vital mission of cultivating students' core literacy competencies, with the development of imagination serving as a pivotal dimension. In the third stage, the enhancement of students' cognitive abilities paves the way for imagination to develop in depth and logical coherence. However, traditional reading instruction exhibits certain limitations in both its pathways and effectiveness for stimulating imagination. Educational theatre, characterized by its strong emphasis on context, experiential learning, and creativity, serves as an innovative approach for cultivating students' imagination in Chinese reading classrooms. This paper focuses on Chinese reading instruction at this educational stage, using the teaching of "The Destruction of the Old Summer Palace" as a case study. It explores practical models for specifically stimulating, constructing, and concretising students' imagination through educational theatre activities, analyses their effectiveness, and proposes optimisation strategies.

Keywords

educational theatre, primary school third stage, Chinese reading instruction, imagination cultivation, practical research

1. Introduction

Imagination constitutes a core competency for profound textual comprehension and the activation of innovative thinking, holding significant importance in upper primary Chinese reading education. students in the third stage are at a pivotal juncture transitioning from concrete operational to formal

operational thinking, where their imaginative development exhibits both vitality and an urgent need for guidance. Within practical Chinese language classrooms, cultivating systematic and creative imagination often confronts dual challenges of methodology and effectiveness. Educational theatre, through its characteristics of physical engagement, role-playing experiences, and collaborative scenario creation, constructs an immersive learning environment. It offers students diverse pathways to develop rich associations, integrate ideas logically, and express themselves through embodied performance (Salmon & Gang, 2022; Howell & Heap, 2013). emerging as a vital approach to overcoming existing teaching challenges and effectively nurturing students' imagination. This practical research aims to explore the specific operational forms of integrating educational theatre into Chinese reading instruction and its underlying mechanisms for fostering students' imaginative development.

2. Analysis of the Correlation Between Reading Instruction in the Third Primary School Stage and Imagination Cultivation

2.1 Cognitive and Imagination Development Characteristics of Third-Stage students

Students in the third primary stage (Years 5-6) occupy a critical period of cognitive development. Students at this stage begin to develop abstract thinking abilities, grasping more complex logical relationships, though their reasoning still relies on concrete imagery for support. Their emotional experiences become richer, with nascent understanding of social phenomena and interpersonal dynamics, enabling them to attempt considering issues from others' perspectives. These cognitive characteristics directly influence the trajectory of imagination development, shifting imaginative activities away from purely unfettered, boundless associations towards greater connections with lived experiences and social cognition. In language arts reading instruction, educators must recognize these characteristics, protecting students' freedom of imagination while guiding it toward more profound and logically coherent development (Vygotsky, 2004).

2.2 Current Practices and Challenges in Cultivating Imagination through Chinese Reading Instruction

In Chinese reading instruction for the third stage, imagination cultivation primarily relies on traditional methods such as guided questioning and continuation exercises. Teachers frequently pose questions such as "What would you do if you were the protagonist?" or require students to complete story endings. While these methods stimulate imagination to some extent, they often remain fragmented and isolated exercises, lacking systematic planning for imaginative development. Students' imaginative activities tend to be confined within the teacher's predetermined framework, hindering the formation of coherent thought chains.

Current teaching methods still suffer from insufficient experiential elements. Most students rely on static text for imagination, lacking physical engagement and contextual immersion. This singular approach to imagination leads to superficial thinking, hindering deep engagement with textual core. Imagination often manifests as fragmented, with students unable to integrate scattered ideas organically. Without concrete contextual support, imaginative activities risk becoming arbitrary associations

unrelated to the text, struggling to produce logically rigorous, deeply considered outcomes.

2.3 The Distinctive Advantages of Educational Theatre as a Vehicle for Cultivating Imagination

Educational theatre offers a distinctive pathway for nurturing imagination in primary school Chinese reading instruction. By creating concrete scenarios, it establishes a practical platform for students' imaginative engagement, transforming abstract text into perceptible settings. Role-playing enables students to delve into characters' inner worlds, generating richer associations through emotional resonance. This embodied learning experience provides a tangible foundation for imaginative activities. Educational theatre prioritises process over outcome, granting students space for free expression. Within educational theatre, students must creatively interpret textual content, translating personal understanding into concrete actions. This dynamic mode of expression compels students to continually refine and enhance their imaginative content. The interactive nature of theatre further facilitates the collision of ideas through exchange, propelling imagination towards deeper and more systematic development (Bowell & Heap, 2013).

3. Constructing an Educational Theatre Teaching Model Oriented Towards Cultivating Imagination: Taking The Destruction of the Old Summer Palace as an Example

3.1 Immersive Contextualisation and Divergent Association: From Historical Text to Fantastic Narrative

During the initial script-writing phase, the focus lies in dismantling rigid historical narratives, encouraging students to shift perspectives and foster associative thinking. The teacher poses a central question: "If the zodiac animal heads came to life, what tale would unfold on their journey home?" This prompt swiftly ignites divergent thinking. Students transcended the realist framework of "plunder-pursuit-recovery," generating abundant whimsical and fantastical concepts: one envisioned the serpent head rescued by a devoted serpent-worshipping community; another conceived the dragon head crossing oceans with aquatic allies, only to be accidentally hauled aboard by fishermen; yet another proposed introducing "authentic versus counterfeit heads" to heighten dramatic tension and intrigue.

The students' imagination extended beyond plot conception to the creative construction of stage settings. Demonstrating initiative, they utilised limited local resources to independently design and craft props, transforming abstract visions into tangible materiality. For instance, to depict a scene of snakes chasing through a forest, rather than relying on elaborate sets, the students collectively crafted whimsical tree shapes from discarded cardboard boxes found in the classroom, cutting and painting them by hand. For the pivotal "ocean waves" scene in the script, students experimented with large swathes of blue fabric, shaking and undulating it to mimic water movement. One student even proposed partially dyeing sections of the fabric to depict the varying depths of the waves. This very act of "scenery creation" using simple materials served as an excellent exercise in association and creativity. At this stage, the teacher fully respected all wildly imaginative ideas, guiding students to document these scattered "sparks of imagination" to lay the groundwork for logical integration in the

next phase.

3.2 Script Creation and Logical Integration: Constructing the "Animistic" Story Framework

During the "Script Development and Logical Integration" phase, the focus shifts to cultivating students' ability to sift through, organise, and imbue their myriad fantastical ideas with internal logic. Each group first articulates the plausibility and dramatic potential of their core concept, followed by a class-wide discussion on how to integrate these personified narratives with the historical context and patriotic sentiment underlying the text.

For instance, regarding the concept of "animals escorting the animal heads," students must consider: What motivates the animals? (e.g., snakes' reverence for the "Snake God," turtles' respect for the "Dragon King"). For the "fishermen catching the dragon head" plot, students designed character dialogue that both reflected ordinary people's personalities (e.g., one determined to hand it over to the state, another tempted to sell it) and naturally conveyed the theme of "repatriating cultural relics". When integrating the debate over the "authenticity of the dog-headed statue," students ingeniously incorporated patriotic knowledge quizzes (e.g., questions about National Day or national spirit). This not only enhanced comedic effect but also endowed the plot development with an internal logic of discerning truth from falsehood, achieving an organic unity of imagination with knowledge and logic. Students fully immerse themselves in the context, simultaneously enhancing their national pride and cultural confidence. By immersing students in moral dilemmas derived from significant historical events, the activity stimulates their emotions and critical thinking while fully engaging their imaginations. These ethical scenarios prompt students to comprehend and practice core values, thereby cultivating their moral character (Lu, 2022).

3.3 Rehearsal, Performance and Concrete Expression: Bringing Fantastic Imagination to Life on Stage

The "Rehearsal, Performance and Concrete Expression" phase focused on guiding students to transform written scripts into vivid stage presentations. This process greatly stimulated and showcased the students's initiative. They ceased being passive executors of instructions and became active creators. Through role-playing, students deeply understood, crafted and ultimately inhabited their characters: students portraying animal heads proactively researched and contemplated the "emotions" of artefacts after being looted; Those portraying animals continuously observed, imitated, and creatively used physicality to depict the serpent's sinuous movement and the dolphin's agility; fishermen students spontaneously discussed designing authentic, everyday gestures and dialect dialogue for their characters, rendering them more believable.

In stage direction and detail refinement, students creatively applied associative thinking and logical integration to solve practical challenges: for instance, how to use ropes to simulate the dramatic moment of hauling up the "dragon head," and how collective positioning and rhythmic control could convey the surging waves and narrative tension. During rehearsals for the pivotal "authenticity debate" scene, students proactively suggested incorporating more national spirit content learned in class into the dialogue, enriching the plot with both entertainment value and educational significance. The entire

rehearsal process represented students' continuous application of imagination, association, and logical thinking to actively construct and refine their artistic expression.

4. Practical Outcomes and Reflections

4.1. Analysis of Concrete Manifestations in Students' Imagination Development

Throughout the creation and rehearsal process of this play, the students' imaginative development exhibited a clear, step-by-step progression. When students engaged in storytelling and cross-textual narratives through role-playing, their ability to visualize inner imaginings became particularly pronounced through hands-on creation. This spirit of proactive exploration was fully realized in practice. Through genuine interactions with virtual characters, the distinct traits of these roles naturally emerged, allowing students to tangibly grasp the characters' personalities, behavioral expressions, and spiritual essence.

Firstly, students achieved remarkable results in the realm of concrete expression. For instance, when crafting props of the Twelve Zodiac animal heads, students collaborated in groups. Using basic materials such as cardstock, clay, and foam board, they cut, shaped, and painted to create uniquely personalised animal heads. Students with technical expertise further modelled the heads using 3D software at home and printed them as physical objects. When the students solemnly presented their handcrafted or printed animal heads, it signified the completion of a full cycle: from conceptualisation to creation, culminating in artistic expression. Similarly, during rehearsals for *The Golden Fishhook*, students simulated campfires with old curtains and depicted the arduousness of the Long March through interlocking physical movements. The actor portraying the veteran squad leader transformed textual descriptions into visual stage language through details like stooped posture, hunched back, and trembling while feeding. This conversion of abstract emotion into concrete expression is pivotal in internalising imagination into profound understanding and empathy. Through detailed cues and scene-specific outlines in literary scripts, students engage their creative imagination and activate sensory perception — encompassing sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch — as they design actions, sounds, behaviors, and character interactions that align with the core themes of the work. Through hands-on participation in interpreting and co-creating the story, students clearly articulate their unique interpretations of specific themes, characters, and concepts, thereby deepening their learning and elevating it to a higher level. (Vygotsky, 2004)

Secondly, students demonstrated remarkable initiative in developing associative thinking and logical integration. Drawing inspiration from mythology, fables, and everyday life, they proactively compared, selected, and fused disparate creative ideas. In crafting the script for *The Destruction of the Old Summer Palace*, they ultimately centred the narrative around "the journey home of the twelve zodiac animal heads." This core thread seamlessly integrated independent concepts such as "animal redemption," "oceanic adventure," and "debates over genuine versus counterfeit heads" into a coherent

narrative with unified emotional resonance. They established logical motivations and internal consistency for each plot element (such as the animals' reverence for the "sacred heads" and the fishermen's conflicting psychological struggles), demonstrating the logical thinking required to structure unbridled imagination into a coherent storyline.

Most notably, profound character immersion elevates imaginative expression. One student portraying the "Snake Head" noted in rehearsal reflections: "Initially, I perceived it merely as a treasure. Later, I saw it as a 'person' yearning for home. By the time I performed, I felt I was the statue itself." This progression from comprehension to empathy, culminating in character-actor fusion, signifies how students' imagination has deeply integrated emotion and reason, transforming from a skill into an intrinsic quality.

4.2 Educational Theatre Practice Strategies

Given practical constraints encountered in implementation, educational theatre activities require adaptive adjustments in operational methods. The primary adjustment involves rationally segmenting theatrical activities to seamlessly integrate them into continuous language arts lesson time. Reading instruction inherently involves a continuous process of comprehension. Attempting to cram all elements of dramatisation into one or two lessons often results in a rushed and superficial approach, failing to genuinely stimulate students' imagination. A viable approach is as follows: after the first lesson on a text rich in plot, such as "Borrowing Arrows with Straw Boats," guide students to use their free time to specifically devise character actions and details, or imagine Zhuge Liang's possible expressions in different situations; During the second lesson, organise groups to use simple materials to present key scenes such as "Signing the Military Pledge" and "Borrowing Arrows in the Mist"; in the third lesson, invite students to retell the events from Cao Cao's perspective, forming an oral extension drama. This phased, progressive approach provides ample time for reflection and preparation, effectively preventing activities from becoming ad-hoc and fragmented.

The quality and direction of students' imaginative development are significantly influenced by the teacher's guidance skills, necessitating enhanced professional development. County-level teacher development centres have pioneered workshops where experienced teaching researchers demonstrate how verbal cues and simple positioning shifts can guide students into characters' inner worlds.

The core training content focuses on enabling teachers to understand and master how to design open-ended questions based on textual details. For instance, when studying *The General and the Chancellor*, instead of directly asking "What might Lian Po be thinking?", the question might be framed as: "If you were a courtier witnessing Lian Po removing his battle robes and bearing a bundle of thorns, what would you have wanted to say but ultimately held back?" This training emphasized practical application, requiring participants to experience the entire process through "learning by doing," a method supported by drama-based pedagogy research [5]. This approach helps teachers better anticipate students' cognitive and expressive challenges, enabling them to provide more targeted support.

The organization of classroom activities directly influences each student's level of participation and opportunities for imaginative expression. Simple group cooperation often results in an uneven division of labor, leaving some students confined to passive roles and preventing their imagination from being fully expressed. The key lies in designing specific, well-structured operational methods that ensure every child has space to articulate their imagination. A practical and effective strategy is the use of tiered task cards in drama activities: one set outlines basic roles and actions, while the other encourages imaginative expansion. By selecting tasks according to their interests and comprehension levels, students achieve genuine inclusion—ensuring that "everyone has a role." Role categories extend beyond characters to include narrators, inanimate objects, and even abstract elements of a scene. Within resource-constrained educational contexts, teachers and students have creatively adapted low-cost materials—using corrugated paper to craft props resembling ancient artifacts and repurposing plastic bottles into simple acoustic amplifiers to simulate distinct character voices—turning such improvisation into routine practice. The emphasis remains firmly on the process of experience and creation. Final performances are typically shared within small groups or presented in segments, not for evaluation of performance quality, but to observe how students' imaginations manifest through non-linguistic, multimodal expressions. This approach naturally directs students' attention toward vividly and concretely representing the images they envision.

5. Conclusion

This practical research demonstrates that integrating educational theatre into upper primary Chinese reading instruction effectively addresses the challenges of nurturing imagination. Through lesson examples such as *The Destruction of the Old Summer Palace*, educational theatre demonstrates its unique value in stimulating students' imagination: it guides divergent thinking through "immersion in context", promotes logical integration via "script creation", and achieves concrete expression through "rehearsal and performance", forming an interlinked, progressively deepening developmental pathway. To ensure effective implementation, teachers must understand upper primary students' cognitive characteristics, scientifically decompose theatrical objectives into the teaching process, and enhance their instructional guidance through professional development. Furthermore, employing tiered tasks and group collaboration mechanisms that prioritise experiential learning over outcome assessment are crucial for enabling all students to fully exercise their imagination.

Looking ahead, the deep integration of educational theatre with Chinese reading instruction holds vast potential for exploration. For instance, adapting this model to teaching narrative and expository genres, and leveraging digital tools to broaden the scope of theatrical creation and expression, warrant thorough investigation. By truly establishing educational theatre as a wellspring of imagination within Chinese language classrooms, it will powerfully advance the holistic development of students' core literacy competencies.

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