

**“Good Morning, Birds!”: A Story to Bring Hope and Joy**

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The closure of schools caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has placed a burden on families and parents. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) point out the adverse consequences of school closures, including gaps in childcare, parents unprepared for distance and homeschooling, social isolation, etc. This story depicts a conversation between a four-year-old boy and me, which led to an unexpected home learning outcome.

Due to the COVID-19, I was not able to go back to China and meet with my family this past summer. Instead, I moved to stay with my friend's family. My friend and her husband came to the United States twelve years ago. They have two sons: Jin who is 11, and Lan who is 4. Both children stayed home starting in March of 2020. Jin makes daily schedules for himself and studies independently, most of the time. Usually, he studies math in the morning, practices the piano right after lunch, does some writing and drawing in the afternoon, and then spends at least an hour reading books in Chinese. However, Lan, a lively, talkative boy, doesn't seem to have much to do. His parents, like many other working parents, have been working from home because of the pandemic. They do not have much time to be with the little boy during the day. If there weren't COVID-19, Lan would have spent lots of time at a daycare center, playing and interacting with peers, which is key to children's learning at this age. However, now Lan has to be alone for long periods each day. Sometimes he would ask his parents or me to play with him. If none of the adults were available, he would ask if he could use an iPad to play video games.

Ever since I arrived at my friend's place, I wondered about how to support Lan's learning. While the parents try their best to spend as much time as possible with Lan in the evening; during the daytime, I read some books to him, either in English or Chinese, and I also spent some time playing games with him. But this was far from enough. I wondered, what else could I/we do?

It was a summer morning with a cool breeze and birds whistling. I walked into the backyard to have some fresh air. Then, Lan came. I said, “早上好，兰！ (Good morning, Lan!)” He replied, “早上好，阿姨！ (Good morning, Aunt!)” He rubbed his eyes and came near me, not completely awake. I wanted to start a conversation and wake up his mind, so I said, “早上好，小鸟们！ (Good morning, birds!)” Lan looked up at me and smiled. Here's how the conversation continued in the following five minutes (L for Lan, Y for me). Our conversation was in Mandarin and I translated it into English later on.

Y: 早上好，小鸟们！

Y: *Good morning, birds!*

L: 小鸟们？它们在哪里？

L: *Birds? Where are they?*

Y: 我看不见它们，却能听见它们的叫声。你能听到吗？

Y: *I cannot see them, but I can hear them. Can you?*

L: (沉默了几秒钟) 是的，小鸟啾啾地叫！

L: *(silent for several seconds) Yes! The birds tweeting.*

Y: 还有些鸟在唧唧地叫！

Y: *The birds chirping.*

L: 它们在树上找吃的。

L: *The birds are looking for food in the tree.*

Y: 我们还要对谁说早上好？

Y: *To whom else shall we say good morning?*

L: 早上好，松鼠！

L: *Good morning, squirrel!*

Y: 哈哈，是的！松鼠们经常在电线上跑来跑去。电线是它们的跑道。

Y: *Yes! The squirrels run back and forth on the cable very often. The cable is like their track.*

L: 它们从这头跑到那头, 再从那头跑到这头 (指着横在空中的电线).

L: (沉默了一会儿, 好像在思考) 早上好, 气球!

Y: 气球在哪儿?

L: 在那儿!

L: *They run from this end to that end, and then from that end to this end*

*(pointing to the cable above the yard).*

L: *(kept silent for a short while, thinking)*

*Good morning, balloons!*

Y: *Balloons? Where are they?*

L: *There!*

Lan pointed up at the cables above the yard. There were two broken balloons, which got tangled on the cables.

Y: 我看见了。它们什么时候飞上去的?

L: 去年我过生日的时候。

Y: 原来是这样。现在, 我要对草丛里的桑葚说早上好。

Y: *Now I see them. When did they go up there?*

L: *Last year, my birthday party.*

Y: *I see. ... Now, I am going to say good morning to the mulberries in the grass.*

There's a big mulberry tree outside, whose branch stretched into the yard. Mulberries would fall onto the grass from time to time.

L: 特别甜, 吃完嘴唇变成紫色了。该我了。早上好, 院墙上的草!

Y: 哦, 你是说那些藤蔓吧。我不知道它是哪种植物, 只觉得它很漂亮。

L: *They are so sweet. My lips turned purple after I ate them. Now, it is my turn. Good morning, the grass on the fence!*

Y: *Oh, you mean the vine on the fence. I don't know what type of plant it is, but it's very beautiful.*

The plant was growing outside the yard fence. Its vine climbed up the wall and came into the yard some time ago. Ever since I moved to my friend's house, I witnessed it growing every day.

Y: 你注意到了吗？它每天都在生长。

Y: *Have you noticed that it is growing every day?*

L: 对，它从墙上爬下来了。

L: *Yes, it is climbing down on the fence.*

Y: 它想要做什么？

Y: *What does it want to do?*

L: 可能，想要亲一亲小草。

L: *Maybe... to kiss the grass.*

Y: 真是太美了。现在轮到我了。早上好，花儿们。

Y: *That's beautiful! Now my turn. Good morning, flowers!*

L: 紫色的花。

L: *Purple flowers!*

Y: 黄色的花。

Y: *Yellow flowers!*

L: 没有名字的花。

L: *The flowers with no name!*

Y: 你妈妈种的花。

Y: *The flowers planted by your mum!*

Lan seemed more interested in this Good Morning Game now. He looked around the yard, trying to find something else to send his warm greeting.

L: 早上好，树枝！

L: *Good morning, branches!*

Y: 它们在风中跳舞。

Y: *They are dancing in the wind!*

L: 鸟在树枝上吃东西和睡觉。

L: *Birds are eating and sleeping in them.*

Y: 是的。我能看见一只鸟。接下来，该对谁问好呢？

Y: *Yes, I can see a bird on that branch!*

*What's next?*

L: 嗯.....早上好, 小草。

L: *Mmm... Good morning, grass.*

Y: 昨晚下了雨, 小草洗了个澡。

Y: *It rained last night. The grass took a shower.*

L: 真的吗?

L: *Really?*

Lan walked onto the grass. He took off one of his slippers and put his bare foot gently on the grass.

L: 草是湿的耶, 我的脚也湿了。

L: *The grass is wet! So is my foot.*

The conversation ended there because it was time for us to have breakfast. I realized the conversation between Lan and I could become such a beautiful poem that I had to write it down as soon as possible. I read the poem to Lan. Then we read it together. And then he proudly showed the poem to his parents and brother.

According to Bao, Qu, Zhang, and Hogan (2020), kindergarten children will lose 67% of their literacy abilities during school closures. Loss of formal schooling, social distancing and isolation from friends mainly reduced Lan's language/literacy gaining in English, as he went to a school where English was the dominant language of instruction and there were not any teachers who spoke Chinese. On the other hand, having more time within his parents, family and other caregivers may actually support Lan's development of Chinese language and literacy practices. As stated by Lindfors (2008), children are emergent conversationalists, and they can go beyond themselves by collaborating with other people, usually a more competent conversationalist (Lindfors, 2008, p. 5). In this case, I was the more competent conversationalist, scaffolding the conversation and eliciting Lan's ideas. I used a simple sentence structure “早上好, XXX” (Good morning,

XXX) to initiate the conversation. Lan was inspired by my sending morning greetings to birds. He immediately joined in and co-constructed the conversation by carefully observing the environment and choosing the objects to add new information to the sentence. Duffy (2006) emphasized that when scaffolding children's learning, we need to be "finely tuned to the children's ability" and "respond to and follow up remarks and comment from children" (p. 120). By the time the conversation took place, I had stayed with Lan's family long enough to be familiar with Lan's characteristics, preferences, and needs in language development. Lan loved talking to people and imitating adults' way of talking (mainly in Chinese). He also liked to play with the language just learned by using it repeatedly and surprising the adults by adding/changing content. Therefore, I was able to develop an activity appropriate for Lan's ability that would arouse his interest. The straightforward sentence structure was manageable for Lan while leaving enough space to expand/alter the content based on his observation and imagination. What's more, as noted by Lindfors (2008), "The connection between the expressive system he has mastered and the expressive system he is learning is crucial for the child's literacy development" (p. 15). Four-year-old Lan is quite a good talker, but he has not had many chances to learn and practice reading and writing. I wrote down the content of our conversation in the form of a poem so that Lan could see his spoken words become print and recognize the connections between oral language and print.

I told Lan's parents about how we co-constructed the piece of artwork. They were joyful to read the poem co-authored by Lan and me while feeling guilt that they could not have this type of conversation with Lan very often. Lan's and many other children's parents, who have to work within this unprecedented time, are struggling every day to

balance work and housework, the care of their children, and trying to compensate for lack of interactions with peers.

Sometime later, after the conversation between Lan and me, Lan's parents and two other families decided to get their five children aged from 4 to 11 together and start a home learning club. Knowing one another quite well, the three families have a similar background, all immigrating from China and Chinese is the dominant or one of the dominant languages at home. The children will stay at one of the three homes every day, and one or two parents that are available to attend to the children and giving them necessary help in learning. From Monday to Friday, the six parents will take turns to serve as the tutor, scaffolder, and co-worker (each parent will spend a day or two to work with the children). As a doctoral student whose expertise is education, I will provide suggestions on schedule and curriculum design. The learning club may benefit the three families in multiple ways. The children can have more social connections. The parent(s) can play a crucial role in guiding the children's learning and supporting their holistic development while being with the children. When one or two parents are with the children, the other parents can focus on their work.

Spending time within the club/community will be beneficial to the children in multiple ways. The multi-age group and diverse language practices, such as four-year-old Lan, who mainly speaks Chinese, two other four- and five-year-olds that speak both English and Chinese, and three eleven-, twelve- and thirteen-year-olds who tend to speak English to interact with peers and speak Chinese to interact with parents, will support all of their language and literacy development. The children of different ages will be exposed to a more complex linguistic environment where they can learn from each other

and tap into both English and Chinese. The younger children, especially Lan, will have more opportunities to be immersed in English being with the older children. All of children will need to switch between English and Chinese more frequently than they do in their own home setting in order to interact with different peers/adults and to achieve various communicative goals. While there has been much focus on learning loss, particularly among emergent bilinguals, learning pods, such as this one, point to the need for further research on bilingual children's language and literacy development during remote schooling and the impact the community may have on the development.

I want to end this with a poem co-written by Lan and me. I hope that the story and the poem can bring teachers, parents, schools, and anyone reading these lines, hope, joy, and generate ideas on how to support children and their families during this unprecedented period.

早上好

*Good Morning*

早上好，小鸟！

*Good morning, birds!*

啾啾叫的小鸟，

*The birds tweeting,*

吱吱叫的小鸟，

*The birds chirping,*

在树上找果子吃的小鸟。

*The birds looking for food in the tree.*

早上好，松鼠！

*Good morning, squirrel!*

横在空中的电线是你的跑道，

*The cable in the air is your track,*

你从这头跑到那头，

*You run from this end to that end,*

又从那头跑到这头。

*Then from that end to this end.*

早上好，气球！

去年我过生日时，你来到了我家里，  
从我的手中飞走，  
停在了电线上。

早上好，桑葚！

风和雨把你带进了我的院子，  
我捡起一粒，好甜好甜，  
嘴唇变成了紫色。

早上好，角落里的藤蔓！

你沿着白墙向下爬，  
一寸，一寸，  
想要亲亲小草。

早上好，花儿们！

紫色的花儿，黄色的花儿，  
不知名字的花儿，  
妈妈种的花儿。

早上好，树枝！

你们在风中跳舞。  
你们是小鸟的餐桌，  
也是小鸟的床。

*Good morning, balloon!*

*You came to my house for my last birthday.  
You flew away from my hand,  
Then stopped on the cable.*

*Good morning, mulberries!*

*Wind and rain brought you in the yard.  
I picked one up, so sweet!  
My lips turned purple.*

*Good morning, the vine in the corner!*

*You climbed down the white wall,  
Inch by inch,  
Kissing the grass underneath.*

*Good morning, flowers!*

*Purple flowers, yellow flowers,  
The flowers with no name,  
The flowers planted by mom.*

*Good morning, branches!*

*You are dancing in the wind.  
You are the dining table and beds,  
For the little birds.*

早上好，小草！

你在昨夜的雨里洗了个澡，

我轻轻踩了上去，

湿了脚丫。

*Good morning, grass!*

*You had a shower in the rain last night.*

*I placed my foot gently on you,*

*My foot got wet.*

### References

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