

Benefits of Shared Reading: For L1 and L2 Learners

読み聞かせ活動の効果について - L1とL2学習者

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Most children experience their parents reading aloud stories in their L1 without their parents really considering the future benefits of such an activity. However, there has been consistent evidence to support that reading aloud to children is beneficial in a first language and it should be carried out by not only by parents but also teachers as well. Recently, more and more teachers are recognizing that shared reading using an interactive or dialogic method can be effective in first and second language classes. Thus, this paper outlines the benefits of shared reading in first and second languages, and then discusses the pedagogical considerations for training teachers to use shared reading in Japanese EFL classrooms.

Key words : shared reading, reading aloud to children or students, L1, L2.

1.1 Introduction

As outlined in the new Courses of Study Guidelines (MEXT, 2018) English is now required to be taught from Grade 3 in elementary schools throughout Japan. In addition to that change, MEXT has clearly recommended shared reading as one of the ways to develop the listening skills of young learners of English. However, educational institutions abroad consider shared reading to have a wide range of benefits in addition to listening skill development and the aim of this paper is to outline some of those points for Japanese elementary school teachers who are considering using picture books in their English classes.

Any parent who has read aloud books to a child over an extended period knows that reading aloud can influence a child's language skills, way of thinking and so much more. However, for novice second language teachers concerns about their own language skills tends to make them feel reluctant to do shared reading and they often turn to a safer, less demanding activity without giving shared reading a chance to work its magic. Thus, novice second language teachers, in particular, need to understand why regular shared reading is beneficial in order to motivate them to include this teaching method in their classes, and they also need to understand what methods should be used to make shared reading more effective for second language classes.

1.2 Reading Methods Used in Japanese Classes

There are two main methods of reading aloud in Japan. The first method usually involves an adult reading to a child which is known as shared reading or *yomikikase* (読み聞

かせ) in Japanese. It should be noted that according to the writer's observations, teachers who do shared reading in Japan, are often less expressive and encourage less interaction than teachers in western countries. Instead, another method is far more popular in Japan, and this method requires students to read aloud (RA) a text or story which is known as *ondoku* (音読) in Japanese. The *ondoku* method is frequently used in Japanese and English classes and usually involves the re-reading of the same text. The pitfall of using only this method is that language teachers can feel they are including oral language practice which is accuracy based and overlook the importance of spontaneous oral language practice. In Japan, many teachers include reading aloud practice (RA) in their lessons but do not consider shared reading even though shared reading which involves adults reading aloud to children is often the cornerstone of many literacy programs in English-speaking countries and is considered to be highly effective for assisting language development especially if dialogic or interactive shared reading methods are implemented.

For Japanese children, parents are usually the main adults that read aloud books to them and surprisingly elementary school teachers in Japan do not frequently use this method. One of the main factors for not using this method in Japan, may relate to the reliance on course textbooks that are required in nearly every subject throughout elementary school. Another reason may also be linked to the fact that *ondoku* practice is regularly set by teachers for homework for Japanese reading practice in elementary schools. Thus, up until now adults reading to children for pleasure plays a relatively minor role in Japanese first and second language education in elementary schools.

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However, writers and researchers have suggested that there is a major difference in the way children feel when they asked to read aloud (*ondoku*) compared to the way they feel when they have the opportunity to hear an adult read to them (*yomikikase*). For example, Katherine Paterson points out that when you ask a child or student to read aloud a story or passage, this feels more like a test, but when you read aloud to a child or student it is more like a gift (Paterson cited in Trelease, 2019). Fortunately, these days we have YouTube so parents and teachers can access a vast number of stories to fill the place of a sick or tired parent or teacher who wants to satisfy a child or their students' desire to hear an interesting story. In spite of having technology-enhanced stories, parents and teachers should not rely too much on them since the human element is essential and technology cannot match the attention that the child or student feels during a shared reading experience. The next section outlines the main types of shared reading methods that are available to parents and teachers.

2. Types of Shared Reading

Basically, there are three main types of shared reading methods which include: shared reading, interactive shared reading and dialogic shared reading.

Traditionally, shared reading involves "an adult reading a book to one child or a small group of children without requiring extensive interactions from them" (Trivette & Dunst, 2007, p.2). On the other hand, Trivette & Dunst, (2007) explain that interactive shared reading involves a range of techniques that aim to engage children in the story including: before, during and after shared reading interaction which encourages children to actively participate in the shared reading session. The third type of shared reading method is dialogic reading and while this method is similar to interactive shared reading, the creator of this method believes the child should be encouraged to summarize the story at the end of the shared reading session, and asserts that the adult's role is to be the listener, the questioner, and the audience for the child (Whitehurst, 2012). Thus, research on the benefits of shared reading relate to one or more of these shared reading methods.

3. Benefits of Shared Reading For First Language Learners

Over the past twenty to thirty years, ten main benefits have been linked to various shared reading methods with first language learners.

3.1 Provides Opportunities to Improve Vocabulary

To start with, many studies have determined reading

aloud to children is beneficial for vocabulary development. One of the reasons why it can be an effective method as Layne (2015) points out is because it exposes children to more challenging vocabulary than what they would be exposed to in oral communication and also provides the vocabulary in context which makes it easier to remember. However, the most important factor for helping vocabulary development clearly relates to the illustrations in picture books which makes some types of words easier to understand than others.

Some researchers like Pinter (2009) believe that the repetitiveness of language within stories makes the language more noticeable and this can often make it easier for words to be remembered. This has been supported by the findings of Horst, Parsons, and Bryan (2011) who revealed that preschoolers can retain and recall words more from hearing the same stories again and again rather than hearing different stories on the same themes. Thus, reading books with clear illustrations, repetitive language and exposing children to several shared reading sessions using the same book is more effective for vocabulary development.

3.2 Demonstrates Expressive Reading and Models Fluency

In addition to vocabulary development, every time a child listens to a story by a teacher or parent, those adults are modeling the way English should be read and spoken. The way stories are read can expose children to the rhythm of written language, chunks of language, grammatical structures, structures of stories and the metalanguage of literacy. Australian children's book writer, Mem Fox (2008) suggests that exposure to the rhythm of language is particularly important in English and that the more expressively an adult reads a story the more willing a child will pay attention and try to read. She goes on to add that expressive reading includes use of a loud or soft voice, a slow or fast voice, pausing, creating highs and lows in the story, and using eyes expressively in order to grab the audience. Often the interesting and expressively read sections are the parts that children are more likely to remember and repeat. However, the stories in English textbooks in Japan are seldom read expressively which indicates a need for more exposure to authentic books, rhymes and songs.

3.3 Assists Comprehension

While teachers and parents may initially want to encourage children to notice language through expressively read stories in shared reading sessions, they should feel reassured that comprehension is also developed with such

experiences. In order to assist comprehension during shared reading “the adult is structuring the whole interaction” (Barton, 1994, p. 143) and this usually involves aspects that are also found in classroom talk, such as “getting attention, asking a question, providing an answer, and giving feedback” (Barton, 1994, p. 143). One shared reading method that was developed for parents and teachers is known as *dialogic reading* which is similar to interactive shared reading. Dialogic reading involves using the *PEER sequence* and/or *CROWD prompts*. It was developed by Whitehurst (2012), and ensures that children not only focus on key words, expressions or pictures to improve their comprehension of stories but also see good reading practices. Parents or teachers who use the PEER sequence, prompt children for information, evaluate their comments, expand their responses, and encourage them to repeat the modeled language. On the other hand, when a parent or teacher uses the CROWD prompts the adult asks children to complete the phrases or questions, asks questions to gain information from the story, asks what, where, why, when and how questions, and asks questions that link the story content to their lives. A study by Trivette & Dunst (2007) suggests that using interactive shared reading or dialogic reading methods are more effective than simply reading picture books without encouraging children’s active participation. Thus, by using these methods, comprehension skills, understanding of vocabulary and listening and speaking skills can be enhanced.

3.4 Creates Opportunities to Develop Speaking Skills

A great deal of research on shared reading has been carried out on very young children in English speaking countries. If parents or teachers use the PEER sequence and CROWD prompts with picture books, research does suggest that the speaking skill development of young L1 learners can improve. One study by Zevenbergen and Whitehurst (2000) showed that young children’s L1 oral language complexity improved from parent-child dialogic reading and Newman (1996) discovered that children are likely to read along with predictable texts which means the children are repeating and remembering lines from books. Naturally, prompts and feedback, such as corrections and confirmations can encourage expressive language skill development. Thus, parents and teachers should create a regular shared reading program that includes a method that encourages interaction.

3.5 Helps Create Vivid Connections and Memories

Everyone knows that books can leave an impression and this is partly because picture books require the reader or listener to create meaning from the pictures and words which stimulate children’s imaginations especially if books other than *concept* books are used for shared reading sessions.

By talking about stories, children can “learn many things about life, about adults, about the family, about knowledge and how to acquire it” (Barton, 1994, p.143-145) and about social and cultural practices. Furthermore, they can relate their own lives to stories and create stronger connections to the stories or be reminded of their own experiences. This leads to the next benefit regarding the way shared reading can connect children with others.

3.6 Creates Opportunities for Children to Connect With Others

As Barton explains there is a “strong social basis of children’s early learning of literacy” (1994, p. 14) and this usually starts with parents reading bedtime stories in their L1. Many great discussions can develop from a book and this can often enable both the parents and children to get to know each other better and develop stronger bonds. This can also occur in the classroom with teachers and students when interesting or challenging topics are the focus of stories. By reading such stories teachers can better understand their students’ interests and raise topics to unite a class or encourage better awareness of other views.

3.7 Prepares Children for Reading

Numerous studies have focused on how shared reading can help preschoolers from low-socioeconomic groups, L2 learners or special needs groups. Such studies have generally focused on print knowledge, oral language or phonological processing and used vocabulary tests for assessment. Thus, it is possible to determine that shared reading using an interactive method can lead to positive outcomes with very young learners from a diverse range of backgrounds (Trivette & Dunst, 2007).

Unfortunately some L1 learners do struggle to learn to read in English not only due to reading problems, such as dyslexia but also because they have had limited exposure to certain types of interaction with books and shared reading (Heath, 1982). For some children “reading problems are difficult to fix but very easy to prevent. Prevention happens *long before a child starts school*” (Fox, 2008, p. 13). By implementing regular shared reading sessions children

can be better prepared for literacy skill development by gradually building the size of their vocabularies, helping them understand the structure and content of stories, and developing their print awareness.

3.8 Fosters an Interest in Books

An additional benefit of exposing children to books through shared reading early on means that it can help ease children into reading practice and also expose children to the two main types of reading: efferent and aesthetic reading. Most Japanese students experience efferent reading which involves reading to gain information in English. On the other hand, the second type is “aesthetic reading, in which the person is drawn into the story and participates through identification with characters” (Mendoza & Reese, 2001, p. 3) and this is often not encouraged enough. Instead of just reading from textbooks children should be encouraged to read or listen to stories for their own enjoyment and entertainment. If shared reading is carried out regularly using a wide range of books, children are more likely to experience a shared reading session using a book of their interest. According to Layne (2015), it is rare for a book to appeal to every student in a class due to its theme, style of writing or characters which means teachers and parents should introduce a wide range of books to identify interests. In addition, Codell (2003) points out that there are many problems due to the reading of just one textbook and recommends that children should be able to choose what they read. Thus, a range of books as well as numerous opportunities to choose stories to listen to are essential aspects of developing a good shared reading program.

3.9 Helps Children Gain Knowledge

Although allowing them to choose their own stories should be encouraged by parents and teachers, it is also possible to develop children’s knowledge through certain types of books. According to Sipe’s summary of research (2000) into shared reading, children can gain cultural and social awareness through interactions with adults about stories, critical thinking skills, and an awareness of the story world and real world. Also, depending on the types of books that are being read, it is also possible to gain historical and factual knowledge as well.

Paul (2003) suggests using CDs of stories can assist the development of listening skills, which in turn can develop their knowledge of English pronunciation. For example, CDs of stories provide exposure to different voices including different genders, age groups, and different accents. However,

JTEs (Japanese Teachers of English) can invite ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) from different countries to do shared reading which can provide students with the opportunity to hear the same book read by different people using different methods and accents, and this will help encourage students to identify differences and similarities in the way native English speakers speak.

3.10 Creates a Group Learning Environment

The final benefit that should be pointed out is that when students gather to listen to a story in the classroom, everyone is listening together which creates a sense of security. If the teacher uses an interactive shared reading method, they will also be involved in answering the teacher’s questions about the story. Shy students are not pressured to speak and they may use their first language. On the other hand, confident students may provide answers or ask questions which may be of interest to other children or their comments may promote understanding within the whole class. Therefore, shared reading is a quick and effective way to encourage group bonding which also provides a wide range of additional benefits as previously stated.

4. Benefits of Shared Reading in Second Language Classrooms

Many of the points included as benefits of shared reading for L1 learners can also be considered beneficial for L2 learners. To start with, research by Kido (2011) found that there are differences in the word classes that elementary school Grade 1 students learn. She concluded that nouns appear to be better learned by flash cards, but “verbs seem equally learnable by shared reading and by flash cards” and “adjectives are most likely to be better learned by shared reading” (p.26). Other studies, such as by Elley (1989) have also determined that receptive vocabulary increases, and unintentional learning of vocabulary does occur. However, according to Ping’s findings (2014), teachers’ understanding of instructional strategies are important in facilitating the learning of grammar and vocabulary. This suggests that L2 teacher training is needed to effectively carry out shared reading in L2 classrooms.

On the other hand, Sheu’s study (2008) of the views of Taiwanese elementary school teachers who used shared reading found teachers believed picture books provided a meaningful context to learn words and children’s understanding was deepened by referring to the pictures in the books. Researchers, such as Cameron (2001) also assert that children are able to recall the meaning of some words or

phrases and show interest in stories.

Since L2 learners are not exposed to environments that are rich in the second language, Kirsch (2016) insists that picture books fill this gap. In fact, one study by Newman (1996) found that young children could develop receptive language and concepts of print irrespective of the parent's reading proficiency which is likely to be of interest to Japanese parents and teachers who want to read aloud to children in English. However, it should also be noted that experienced teachers use a range of teaching strategies and methods to engage and encourage participation. Thus, merely reading aloud picture books is not enough, and teachers or parents need to create the right conditions for an effective learning environment.

In order to create the ideal learning environment, an interactive shared reading method is one way to encourage learners to notice and expose learners to language. Whitehurst has outlined ways to talk about books with children using the dialogic reading method that involves the PEER sequence and/or CROWD prompts (Whitehurst, 2012) which has been previously mentioned in this paper. The reason why such a method is effective is because L2 learners can develop their speaking skills by responding to the teacher's prompts. However, Ping's research (2014) on preschool children learning German as a second language found that smaller groups encouraged more interaction.

Furthermore, researchers like Mourao (2015) have indicated that there is a need for L2 classrooms to move beyond simply focusing on individual words and their acquisition with picture books. She goes on to suggest that repeated reading is needed for "children to reflect on language and meaning" (p.63), and the use of their L1 should not be discouraged during discussions. Thus, dialogic reading or interactive shared reading that allows L1 usage should be encouraged in L2 shared reading sessions.

Other studies have pointed out that when stories are read expressively students do recall words from the stories more easily and listening to teachers' reading aloud exposes students to more natural English. By listening to a range of stories students can also become more aware of different perspectives and customs through stories which can make them more accepting of difference, and discussions during shared reading activities enable children to get to know each other better through the questions and topics brought up by the teachers.

Although there is little evidence of the prevention of reading problems through L2 shared reading, exposing children to the L2 through shared reading before expecting them to

read is a natural process in L1 learning. Thus, you would expect children to progress more smoothly in L2 reading as well.

Finally, by introducing a wide range of picture books, L2 students are more likely to develop an interest in reading in English and English books. Teachers should offer appealing books that students can associate reading as an enjoyable experience which in turn can increase intrinsic motivation and encourage them to read. Thus, regular exposure to a wide range of books is needed for ultimate success for L2 learners.

5. Pedagogical Considerations for English Teacher Education in Japan

Firstly, teachers need to be aware that it is okay to read the same books again and again. Many Japanese teachers have the view that students will get bored but there can be a variety of benefits from reading the same books more than once. In fact, research suggests that shared reading three to four times is more effective for vocabulary development in both L1 and L2 studies (McGee & Schickedanz, 2007), especially if the teacher chooses an interactive method to do shared reading. Also, rereading can increase comprehension and provide students with an opportunity to focus on different aspects of the story that they may not have noticed during the first reading.

Secondly, shared reading is generally considered to be suitable for very young learners in Japan, but foreign language education experts like Lynne Cameron (2001) have pointed out that older children can benefit from shared reading if the complexity and range increases and teachers "ensure that children understand the overall meaning of what they hear and most of the vocabulary" (p.141). Most children start out enjoying books in their first language. However, it is important that students do not focus on reading and memorizing textbooks in English by rote learning and instead they should also have opportunities to hear stories in English for entertainment which means JTEs need more opportunities to learn about authentic materials, such as picture books and alternative teaching methods.

Thirdly, exposing students to effective shared reading methods using authentic English and rhythm can help students become familiar with English and prepare them to become better speakers and readers of English. If teachers include a wide range of questions and prompts during shared reading, they can develop students' ability to listen and spontaneously respond to questions without preparation. Such practice is clearly needed in English classrooms in Japan. Thus, JTEs should be taught about the PEER prompts and CROWD

sequence in order to carry out shared reading effectively.

Finally, for those teachers who hope to have a positive long term impact on their students, regular shared reading can help students develop their understanding of the formulaic structures of stories and expressive language of stories. Such knowledge can be particularly useful for Japanese students who are likely to take English proficiency tests like Eiken, that often require interviewees to make stories from pictures in speaking tests. If they have experienced listening to a wide range of stories early on in their English education, it will be easier for students to develop story telling skills later on.

6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the potential benefits of shared reading not only in the homes of children who speak English as a first language but also for second language learners. Interactive shared reading and dialogic reading can provide the following benefits, such as:

1. Provide opportunities to introduce and expand vocabulary
2. Demonstrate expressive reading and providing models of fluency
3. Assist comprehension
4. Help create vivid connections and memories
5. Create opportunities for children to connect with others
6. Prepare children for reading
7. Create opportunities to develop speaking skills
8. Foster an interest in books
9. Help children gain knowledge
10. Create a group learning environment

Naturally, there are many factors that influence the extent of the benefits outlined in this paper, such as the frequency of shared reading, book choice, techniques, methods, experience and ability of the teachers. However, shared reading deserves more attention in English classes in Japan due to the diverse range of benefits and the potential to expose children to authentic language which can also introduce students to an enjoyable way of learning English. By regularly implementing shared reading in L2 classes, teachers can create an English rich environment that can be beneficial for Japanese students.

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