

Examining pupils' image of English, before and after short storytelling sessions, in a Japanese primary school.

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Abstract

Humans have been motivated and inspired by stories since the beginning of civilization itself and storytelling can be found in even the most primitive cultures. Regarding literacy skills for native speakers, it is said that; "The more you read, the better you get at it; the better you get at it, the more you like it; and the more you like it, the more you do it, (Trelease, 20013, pp.4).

Children naturally search for meaning in the pictures, words and sounds presented in picture books, and easily pick up language used repeatedly, so reading picture books aloud could be considered an ideal introduction to foreign languages for young children.

In this study, pupils' preconceived image of English as a subject was compared before and after a series of ten short storytelling sessions. Findings from the completed questionnaires indicate that this narrative based approach of reading picture books out loud and watching university students acting out original plays, were considered enjoyable and easy to understand by the pupils and had the added effect of enhancing the majority of the pupils' image of English as a subject, in a positive way.

Key words : Preconceptions (先入観)

Storytelling (本の読み聞かせ)

1. Introduction.

The value of stories as a rich source of language experience for young children is undisputed, and picture books are used universally by parents and teachers all around the world to develop both L1 and L2 language awareness in a meaningful context. To children, stories are appealing and can create a natural interest in language if the level is appropriate; "learners can make considerable progress if they have sustained exposure to language they understand," (Lightbown & Spada 2006, pp.149). So appropriately selected stories can be highly motivational material, because the child tries to keep guessing the meaning of unknown language,

predicting the outcome in their head and listening closely to the story see what will happen at the end, (Moon 2005).

Good stories can develop emotional intelligence, as children begin to relate to and try to understand the feelings of others. They can also create a focus for personalization and communication about the children's feelings, own related experiences and create a "holistic" or joint social experience by reading together, (Read, 2007).

2. The value of reading picture books in early education

The reading of picture books aloud can develop children's skills in listening for gist or grasping

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the general meaning without knowing every word. Sustained reading of stories by a native, or proficient non-native teacher, can develop listening fluency, which Wright (1995), outlines as an essential skill for a language learner and leads to the development of; “a positive attitude to not understanding everything” and “the skills of searching for meaning, predicting, and guessing,” (Wright, 1995, pp.4). In addition to this he points out that through hearing the specific rhythm, intonation and pronunciation of language, learners can also get the “general ‘feel’ and sound of the foreign language,” (Wright 1995, pp.5).

Stories can be chosen by the language teacher to both introduce and recycle key vocabulary, as well as using it as an opportunity to acquire basic language structures in a meaningful rich context, but confirmation questions, pictures, puppets and gestures are essential to aid comprehension of new or difficult words.

Cameron (2001) introduces a study by Elley (1989) in New Zealand where vocabulary in 7 and 8 year old L1 learners was acquired and retained more effectively through listening to stories where the teacher spent time helping children notice, focus on and also explained new words rather than glossing over them or relying on pure presentation in a meaningful context. Adding pictures, an explanation or having pupils act out the words lead to double the retention of new vocabulary items and this lasted in pupils tested three months later.

In the primary language classroom where there is a flexible framework for content, stories can lead to numerous follow up or expansion activities such as drawing, writing and speaking activities or act as a stimulus for artwork, role-play, performances and short skits, (Brewster, Ellis & Girard 2002).

Foreign picture books also involve both obvious and subtle cross-cultural comparisons of food, houses, clothes and customs, which can be focused on and lead to discussions on cultural differences in various societies around the world. This kind of rich content can also be linked by a class teacher to other

subjects such as science and geography, (Kang Shin & Crandall, 2014).

3. Selecting books for English language learning

As outlined above, from a language learning point of view the repeated reading of stories can be a way of leading to improved listening fluency skills and comprehension of both single vocabulary items, structures and chunks of language. This method can be described as a top-down or whole language approach, (Fox 2008), using authentic texts and stories to teach reading skills.

“ ‘Whole language’ teaching was so named in the early eighties for several reasons. The teaching of reading began by engaging children in ‘whole’ stories read aloud by the teacher, real stories that the children heard again and again and learned to love. These stories captured the hearts and minds and made them eager to learn to read. From whole stories teachers then focused on sentences within those stories, then words within those sentences, and finally on the parts of the words: the phonics. But always the phonics, the words, and the sentences made sense since they related back to something that had meaning to the children: a story they loved,” (Fox, 2008 pp159).

This directly contrasts to the method of reading referred to as the bottom-up approach or phonics based method, where first presenting single sounds that make up words, then small ‘chunks’ of words, and gradually building up to words, sentences, and longer text, (Moon 2005).

Stories also create a perfect situation for ‘comprehensible input,’ or language just beyond a child’s level of complete comprehension, introduced by Krashen and Terrell (1983), who’s method could be seen as supporting this top-down, meaning rich approach to input in foreign language as presented in picture books. They state; “Language is best taught

when it is being used to transmit messages, not when it is explicitly taught for conscious learning, (Krashen and Terrell, 1983, pp.55).

In connection to this, when choosing books to read and considering retaining the motivation of the children to listen in English, it is vital to assess the level of English in the materials, as well as content, and keep in mind two well-known models.

The first is 'i + 1,' again created by Krashen and Terrell (1983). This is to assess if new input, in this case the language in picture books is attainable with some effort, which could mean associating the new words to pictures or gestures. The content should be neither too easy or too complex, where 'i' is known language and ' + 1' is a little above that level. In this model what the teacher assessed as level 2 or ' + 2' would be too demanding and demotivate the learner in their challenge to understand.

The second model to keep in mind is the concept that each learner has a "Zone of Proximal Development," or ZPD, (Vygotsky, 1978). This creates an image of the area of possible development of each child where learning can occur if there are appropriately sequenced materials or picture books in this case, but also effective assistance or questioning techniques to expand learning from an adult.

For this study only books that followed the principals set out in these two models, in other words, slightly above the beginner level of the learners, were chosen and plenty of vocal and visual support to aid comprehension was provided by the teacher.

4. Background to the case study

Thanks to the cooperation of staff at the Centre for Disaster Education and Recovery Assistance at this University, a series of ten visits beginning in spring 2015 were set up at a primary school on the coastline of Miyagi Prefecture. Volunteer English teaching sessions based on storytelling were offered

to the school from an experienced native teacher with the dual aim of supporting the teachers and therefore pupils' studies in English and also possibly increasing mental wellbeing through the positive content of the stories and enjoyment of participation in cooperative learning.

Because of its proximity to the coastline, numerous fatalities had occurred in the area due to the Tsunami on 11th March 2011 and the school buildings themselves had been flooded to up to one meter. This left a number of pupils deeply affected and still mentally scarred to some extent, even 5 years later. After discussions with the principal, it was also learned that the school was now facing an influx of new pupils and their families to the area. Families had moved from other damaged areas along the coast and have settled in new housing developments nearby.

The school which has a full quota, but still somewhat limited number of staff compared to its needs, seemed to be in a process of transition, dealing with the problems of the past and also coping with new challenges of increasing numbers of pupils. Due to this, the offer of support in English instruction including activities which could possibly increase mental wellbeing for children, through joint participation in storytelling was readily accepted by the staff.

5. Details of the storytelling sessions

After initial consultation, a group of fifty pupils in two Year Four classes, all aged around 10 years, was selected as the group for the volunteer classes. English is not a compulsory subject for this age group, so they had no timetabled slot for English. The staff decided that the pupils' morning break time of 20 minutes was the only time they could set aside for the sessions. It was agreed to have 10 classes held on a Monday morning throughout the academic year (June to February) on days convenient to both

parties. The schedule of the sessions and detailed content can be seen in Table 1.

This short period of twenty minutes, could have been seen as a disadvantage over the opportunity to use a full forty-five minute period, but it was seen positively as an opportunity to try out the so called “Module” or short period format of studying

which is being focused on in Japan recently. This has been suggested by MEXT, as a way to implement the revised course of study for English in primary school as a subject, which will begin for real in 2020 and involves splitting up a forty five minute class into three fifteen minute “Modules.” The aim of this is to facilitate increased short, almost daily input of

Table 1 Detailed content of the ten sessions.

| | Date /Book/ Activities | Author/Date/ Publisher | Topic/Language Content |
|-----|--|--|---|
| 1. | <u>22 June 2015</u> “Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed,” story, number game and role-play. | Eileen Christelow, 2006, Clarion Books. | “How many?” Numbers, animals, jobs, action words; washing, brushing, jumping. |
| 2. | <u>7 September 2015</u> “A Color of His Own,” story & game. | Leo Lionni, 1975, Scholastic Inc. | “What’s this?” “What colour?” Colors, animals, seasons, importance of friendship, coping with change. |
| 3. | <u>5 October 2015</u> “The Very Hungry Caterpillar,” story & role-play. | Eric Carle, 1969, Scholastic Inc. | “What’s this?” Days of the week, life-cycle of a butterfly, fruit and food in other countries |
| 4. | <u>9 November 2015</u> “What’s the time, Mr Wolf?” game and story. | Annie Kubler, 2003, Child’s play Ltd. | Numbers, time, animals, daily routines, traditional games in other cultures |
| 5. | <u>7 December 2015</u> “Dear Zoo,” quiz and interview game. | Rod Campbell, 1982, Macmillan. | Animals, adjectives, big, small, tall. “What’s this?” “What do you want?” I want a ____ |
| 6. | <u>14 December 2015</u> “Pete the cat - I love my white shoes,” story, song and game. | Eric Litwin & James Dean, 1999, Harper Collins. | “What colour?” Colors, fruit and carrying on when problems occur. |
| 7. | <u>25 January 2016</u> “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?” chant and game. | Bill Martin Jr. & Eric Carle, 1983, Henry Holt Com. | “What’s this?” Animals, colours, rhythmical reading and imaginative creatures. |
| 8. | <u>8 February 2016</u> “Polar Bear, Polar Bear, What do you hear?” & “Panda Bear, Panda Bear, What do you see?” chant and quiz. | Bill Martin Jr. & Eric Carle, 1992 & 2007, Henry Holt Com. | “What’s this?” Animals, threat of extinction, taking care of our planet. |
| 9. | <u>15 February 2016</u> | MUE Students’ original play, “Urashima Taro.” | |
| 10. | <u>22 February 2016</u> | MUE Students’ original plays, “My best gift.” | |

language, but there have been few, if any, trials of what effect using these short sessions have.

This study was seen as a chance to put it to the test and measure the effects of short sessions with storytelling as the main focus.

6. Results from the questionnaire

Keeping in mind the age of the children involved, the questionnaire which was conducted at the end of

all ten sessions consisted of just four questions, three allowed for free writing of answers and one was a ranking question. An example of the questionnaire in English can be seen in Table 2.

Examining of the choice of words the pupils used to describe their general image of English or preconception before the sessions, 60% of pupils chose the word 'difficult.' Other comments included the words 'hard' and 'nervous,' or the phrases; "I didn't think I'd be good at it" or "I didn't think I'd understand."

Table 2 Example of questions in the pupil questionnaire

| | Instructions for pupils | Answer format |
|----|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. | What was your image of 'English' before the storytelling sessions? | Free writing |
| 2. | Rank activities in the order of which you liked them, from 1 to 3 and give your reasons. (a.) Storytelling sessions. (b.) Songs and games, done as follow-up activities to the read-aloud activity. (c.) University students' original plays. | Ranking and giving written reasons. |
| 3. | What was your image of 'English' after the storytelling sessions? | Free writing |
| 4. | What are your general comments after the ten sessions? | Free writing |

This was surprising because this was the first experience of English classes at school and the answers or preconceived image was overwhelmingly negative. Only two pupils had an image of English being 'fun' and something to look forward to.

In comparison, looking at the words chosen to describe their image of English after the sessions 66% used the word 'fun' and 8 used the word 'interesting,' to describe the activities. 9 pupils made the comment that they had come to like English after the sessions.

When gaging the degree of difference in the change of opinion of the pupils, data was sorted into 3 categories; (a.) significant change of opinion, (b.) slight change of opinion and (c.) no change of opinion. To explain in more detail, an example of (a.) significant change of opinion would be; "At first

I thought it would be difficult and awkward to do," then, "My image now, is that English is so much fun and I want to study it more." An example of (b.) a slight change in opinion would be; "Difficult" to "It was difficult, but fun," and (c.) no change would be; "I already learn English and like it, so I thought it would be fun," and "I felt the same as before because I study English already."

When analyzing the data as percentages, 72% of pupils incurred a significant change, 26% incurred a small change and 2% incurred no change in their image of 'English' before and after the sessions. These pupils already had a positive image of English.

As for ranking the three activities (a.) storytelling by reading out loud, (b.) songs and games, and (c.), watching a play performed by university students, it was (c.) storytelling in the form of a play performed

by university students that was chosen as the most popular activity, by 42% of pupils. Storytelling by reading out loud from actual books, (a.) was chosen by 32% of pupils and (b.) songs and games, done as follow-up activities to the read-aloud activity, were selected as the most popular activity by 24% of pupils.

Photo 1. 5 October 2015, "The Very Hungry Caterpillar."



short follow-up activities were chosen by 24% of pupils as number one. This was surprising, because storytelling was more popular than games or songs, although it involved listening to more sustained English as a narrative and often constructing the meaning by yourself through pictorial hints or gestures. It could be said that this study shows that the more demanding and definitely more content based activity of storytelling, was more popular than the easier and more enjoyable, but less challenging and less meaningful activities.

7. Pupil's comments in relation to reasons for using stories.

Some of the children's comments in the questionnaire could be linked directly to some of the reasons outlined above for choosing picture books. The point that stories can create an easy introduction to a foreign language, was mentioned by many children, for example; "It was easy to understand the story because of the pictures,"

If we look at storytelling activities as a whole, whether it was in the form of reading aloud from picture books (eight times) or in the form of a real play acted out in front of the children (twice), then the results show that this was the most popular activity, with a total of 74% of pupils selecting it as number one. Songs, games, quizzes and other

Photo 2. 15 February 2016 Students' original English play, "Urashima Taro."



"Through stories we could hear how English is used naturally and easily understand the meaning," and "Because there was rhythm in the story I could understand and it was fun."

Examples of comments that verify the statement, that stories can develop children's skills in listening for gist were; "When listening to the story in English, thinking what will come next was interesting," and "If there is a story, I can understand English a bit and I could also imagine the meaning."

Regarding the point that stories present an opportunity to acquire basic language structures and vocabulary, pupils wrote; "I found that we use quite a lot of English in our daily lives," and "I learnt English words and enjoyed myself. I want to study more in the future."

In comments on pre-reading, during reading or follow up activities, the pupils wrote; "The questions during and after reading were interesting," "It was fun to move your body to music and dance."

Some comments written by the pupils also related to the model 'i +1,' introduced by Terrell and

Krashan (1983) which was taken into account in choosing the level of difficulty of books. Pupils wrote; "Thank you so much for teaching us in a fun way and in a way that was easy for us to understand," and "It wasn't very hard, so it was fun. I want to try learning more English."

Some comments were also linked to Vygotsky's ZPD theory, which emphasizes the importance of the role of the adult or teacher as intermediator between the materials and the learner. They wrote; "It was difficult, but Alison made it fun, so I was happy," and "I thought that I would not be good at English, but thanks to your explanation, I could enjoy it."

8. Limitations and further research

Ideally, the questionnaire should have been carried out twice separately, before the activities and then again after the activities. Thus gaining a clearer view of the preconceptions and possibly examining why they had the image that English would be difficult. In the post-activity questionnaire, whether the pupils had come to like English, wanted to study it more and why, would have been good areas to collect data on. Further investigation on children's preconceptions of English and how these can be altered through various choices in materials needs to be followed as English is being taught to younger and younger children in Japan and all around the world.

9. Conclusion.

Children enjoyed the storytelling sessions and original plays very much and liked the experience of being read to in English. They wrote; "It made me happy to have a story read to me," "I don't like books much, but I liked the ones you read," and "The books you bring are interesting and I grew to like English."

The aim of supporting pupils' studies in English was set at the start of the sessions and the result of 72% of pupils' image of English changing quite

significantly in a positive way and 26% of pupils' image changing even in a small way, can be considered as proof of reaching this goal. One pupil writes; "I thought it would be difficult, but even from the first time it was fun and I thought I want to do it again." Another writes; "I didn't understand English, so it was a subject I didn't think I'd be good at. When I actually tried it, it was fun and I could do it. I could understand the stories and I changed my mind." If pupils hadn't understood the content well, or didn't feel they had learnt some English, such a positive result would not have been made possible. One pupil writes; "It was fun to learn many new English words," "If we have fun while studying English, it's easier to learn, I thought," and "The last session was the most fun, I could easily understand what the students said."

The second goal of increasing mental wellbeing through the positive content of the stories and enjoyment of participation in cooperative learning can be gaged through comments such as; "We could do it together, so it was fun," and "Everyone looked like they were having such fun in the game." 66% of pupils used the word 'fun' in the questionnaire, and the teachers' impression from observing sessions was that the pupils enjoyed them.

Another aim of this study was to gauge the effect of short study periods, as opposed to regular forty-five minute periods or so called, "Modules," suggested by MEXT as a way to implement the revised course of study for English and facilitate increased short concentrated input of language.

Again, it can be concluded that if the result of 98% of pupils showing a positive change in opinion about English after experiencing even these short, "module-type" sessions was achieved, then there is some worth to this way of organizing and dividing time for study in the new curriculum for English in primary school in Japan beginning officially in 2020. Because 72% of pupils chose storytelling as their favorite activity in the short session, over songs and games, this seems appropriate content to be recommended by MEXT and considered by teachers all over Japan,

for these sessions.

So, as Japanese English education strives to expand and develop towards 2020, there should be increased focus on the potential stories have and practical ways to integrate the reading of picture books in the development of young learners' English skills should be considered. As the US Department of Education study, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*, (1985) states; "The single most important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading, is reading aloud to children," (Trelease, 2013).

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