Teaching Selection of Reading Materials in a Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

　リーディングにおいて，読み手が適切な選書ができるかどうかは，リーディングの質や成否を左右する極めて大切な要素である。選書の大切さは，英語圏の，主に母語でのリーディング教育関連の多くの文献で指摘され，その教え方の具体的な実践報告の蓄積も多い。本論は，外国語としての英語教育においても，選書は読み手を成長させる上で不可欠な要素であることを論じ，まず，主に母語におけるリーディング教育での選書の前提を考察する。次に外国語としてのリーディング教育に応用可能な部分，欠如している部分，および母語としてのリーディング教育と外国語として英語リーディング教育との差異を検討することによって，日本における英語教育において選書を教える際の具体的な手立てを考えるものである。

Introduction

　How individuals choose reading materials varies. They sometimes decide what to read instantly and seemingly unconsciously, other times carefully and deliberately. Proficient readers turn to their repertoire for efficiently and purposefully selecting what to read, including taking advantage of book reviews and recommendations by other people. They also know how to preview a book so that they may quickly distinguish texts of interest from texts less interesting, and are able to abandon the book when necessary.

　It is argued here that selecting "just-right" books is, in most cases, a critical factor for

successful reading and for growth as a reader, and that selecting right books is a teachable, critical skill in the foreign language classroom. The teaching of L1 reading has seen much valuable discussion and many teaching strategies for the choosing of right books. This paper first examines the teaching of the choosing of right books in L1 teaching. Most discussions in L1 reading are based upon the assumption that decoding and identifying words are not equal to reading. This assumption is true, it will be argued, whether students are reading in L1 or L2.

Examined next are issues that emerge when the teaching of L1 reading is applied to the teaching of L2 reading, particularly in the EFL classroom in Japan. These issues include preconceived ideas and experiences about what L2 language learning should be in Japan, the gap between students' intelligence levels and their language proficiency levels, and the gap between oral fluency and comprehension. Mindful of these issues, this paper explores and suggests practical solutions and implications regarding how teachers can teach selecting right books effectively in the EFL classroom in Japan.

1. Supporting the Selection of "Just-Right" Books in the L1 Classroom

In order to become strong readers, first of all, students must read. This simple notion is not simple to implement when all the students are expected to read the same book, often selected and assigned by the teacher, at the same pace and in the same way. Students' reading levels and interests vary; some may spend long hours struggling to figure out what the reading material is about and others may find it difficult not to be bored.

Giving students choices of their reading materials has several advantages. Short, Harste, and Burke (1996, 170–172) point out that book choice gives readers opportunities to connect themselves with reading. Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 44) note that students' "commitment to the texts and their ownership of the process" increase, when they choose what to read. Routman (2003, 97) writes that "students read more when they can choose their reading materials." Robb (2000, 66) regards students' selecting reading materials as one of the key reading strategies that students are supposed to learn[1].

Merely providing students with opportunities to choose what to read, however, does not necessarily work well. Students tend to choose challenging texts because they misunderstand that reading challenging books makes them stronger readers (Routman, 2003, 93). Or they choose "more challenging texts for themselves than teachers choose for them. This may happen when they choose books primarily because of interest rather than familiarity with most of the words on a sample page or two" (Weaver 2002, 243). Struggling with inaccessible, challenging books without adequate comprehension is, of course, not equal to reading. Students must read a book while comprehending it. As Calkins (2001, 35) points

out, "If the books are inaccessible to the child, holding a heavy book does no more for a child's reading than holding a cinder block." Teachers need to teach students the concept of right books and the importance of choosing and reading right books.

Teachers may clarify to students what right books are and how they can select them. For example, Fountas and Pinnell write:

> Just-right books are those that you understand well and can enjoy. You read the book smoothly and have only a few places where you need to slow down to figure out a word or think more about the meaning. These are the books that will help you become a better reader each time you read. Most of the time you should read just-right books (Fountas and Pinnell 2001, 146).

Teachers may involve students in the discussion of the criteria about what just-right books are and together create their class list of right books. The items included in the class list may vary depending upon the ages of students, their history as readers, and their reading ability. Educators show that even young readers in primary grades can contribute to such lists. For example, Routman (2000, 51) shows "a second grade class's guidelines for selecting a 'just right' book; from a shared writing." The guidelines are impressively comprehensive, touching upon language levels, unfamiliar words, background knowledge, genre variety, length, and series.[2]

Giving up books is the other side of choosing right books. Teachers know that abandoning books is acceptable, and even encourage students to do so when necessary. Atwell (1998, 116) states as the second item in her "Rules for Reading Workshop," "Don't read a book you don't like. Don't waste time with a book you don't love when there are so many great ones out there waiting for you." Again, teachers can compile a class list of reasons to abandon books, just as they create a class list for "just-right" books[3].

Many educators believe that students' selecting and reading of right books is important from the beginning of the semester. Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 143–148) present the list "Independent Reading: The First Twenty Days of Teaching" and devote mini-lessons for the first three days to selecting books[4], and teach the topic of abandoning books on Day 6. Other educators share this view of the importance of giving students right books at the beginning of the semester, and the difficulty of doing so, as well. Goldberg and Serravallo (2007, 44–46) suggest that teachers use a reading inventory and research-only conferences, arguing that teachers can acquire important information about readers, and with such information teachers can better support students to choose right books.

Calkins encourages students to read easier books, recognizing the difficulty of matching students with right books. She writes:

> Although in the best of all worlds I might want students to begin the year reading 'just-right' books, my colleagues and I know that no amount of fine-tuned matching between

readers and books could ever guarantee that a particular book will make a lot of sense and be interesting to a particular reader. We therefore tend to talk up the idea that for now, at the start of the year, we'll all read easy books (Calkins 2001, 339).

Calkins focuses on the practical side of selecting books. From her experiences working with many classrooms, she (2001, 121) also suggests that about one-third of the books have different colored dots representing different levels.

As the semester unfolds, teachers try to expand what right books are for each student, including the expansion of genres and the upgrading of levels. The teacher plays several important roles. These include the teacher acting as an experienced reader who can share her reading territories and talk about her reading life (Atwell 1998, 133–139), using interactive read-aloud and shared reading to provide students with opportunities to "read, think, and talk about a wide variety of texts within many different genres" (Collins 2008, 105), and utilizing teacher conferences to help students move from one level to another level rather than selecting and reading more books of the same level (Goldberg and Serravallo 2007, 88–100).

Students as fellow readers play an important role, too. Frequently used strategies often take advantage of the social aspects of reading in the classroom. The information about books that classmates provide is powerful; students are more interested in reading books that their friends recommend. As Calkins (2001, 39) points out, "Books take on social currency." Teachers make the most of this social energy and diversity, and provide opportunities for students to talk about and introduce books to each other. Teachers make book introduction part of the classroom conversations, and these are held among students as well as between the teacher and students. Book introductions to classmates both orally and in writing are conducted in many classrooms.[5]

Other resources should be made explicit and accessible. Many classrooms display a list of how to select books. For example, Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 147) show "Ways We Choose Books"[6], and Serafini (2001, 64) introduces "Criteria for Choosing Books to Read"[7]. Students can create a class's "Top Ten Book List" (Routman 2003, 71–72) or other similar lists. Armed with these accessible sources and encouraged by promotional book introductions by the teacher and by classmates, students can practice choosing books and expanding their breadth of reading.

Allen (2009, 62–75) places the social aspects of reading in a broader context, that of purposes and audiences in reading. Allen looks at "the what" and "the why" of reading and recognizes three audiences and purposes: for ourselves (Allen 2009, 70), for those with whom we have relationships (Allen 2009, 71–73), and for others we may never meet (Allen 2009, 73–74). He (2009, 66, Figure 3.8) further argues that the thinker (the reader) is flexible, and "adjusts process and product according to the what and the why." This view

suggests that just-right books change depending upon the purpose of reading and the audience. Awareness of the purpose of reading and the audience can bring students' reading closer to their lives. Calkins (2001, 387–393) takes another angle for connecting selecting reading materials to real life purposes by introducing what she refers to as the "reading project." In this project, teachers help students to "work with personal direction on a project of their own choice" (Calkins 2001, 388).

In summary, three essential principles may be recognized in selecting right books in L1 teaching. The first principle lies in the assumption that reading without adequate comprehension is not sufficient reading. Upon starting the new semester, the teacher helps students to learn the concept of right books and its importance, while looking for practical ways for assessing students so that she can help them with finding accessible books. The second principle is the view that the classroom is a community of readers who together can help in expanding levels and genres of right books. And the third principle is that the teacher instructs students to be aware of different purposes and audiences of reading, and connects reading in the classroom to their reading life outside the classroom. Based upon these points, the paper now turns to the implications in EFL reading instruction.

2. Teaching Choosing Right Books in the EFL Classroom in Japan

2–1. Translated Sentences and Comprehension

Reading without comprehension is not sufficient reading. This view of reading is often underappreciated in the EFL reading classroom in Japan, where all students are to read the same text and where the students' focus often lies in acquiring "the right" translation (often meaning the translation of the teacher's version) so that they can memorize it for an examination. Students are also often expected to prepare a translation as the main assignment. Some students are satisfied when they complete their translation, and sometimes do not notice (or do not care) when meaning breaks down.

In the EFL classroom where translation is the center of activity, teachers need to demystify the misconception that providing translated sentences is not equal to comprehension. A good way to demonstrate the demystification lies in Routman's L1 teaching. She writes:

> Bring in a text in which you can read the words but don't have the background and vocabulary to understand it—a physics text, a technical manual, a philosophy book, a methods textbook filled with impenetrable jargon, whatever is a very difficult text for you. Then, read aloud fluently and attempt to retell what you've read. Students will see that although you can read the words, you cannot make meaning (Routman 2003, 97).

In the present author's experience, reading aloud such a passage in the teacher's L1 is effective, as the L1 text can be viewed as "a perfect translation." Even when there is a

"perfect" translation that can be read aloud smoothly, it is still possible that the reader has little idea what the text means.　From this short demonstration, the teacher tells students that reading requires comprehension.　Generating an L1 text is not always equal to comprehending an L2 text.　This sets the tone that simply composing a translation (or copying the teacher's version of the translation) is not the goal in the reading classroom.

Next, the teacher may work on two interrelated issues.　One is what right books are. The other is how to approach a text to decide if it is a right book or not.　Regarding the former issue, EFL teachers can apply many strategies from the teaching of L1, such as telling students what right books are, how right books help readers to grow as a reader, and when readers should abandon a book.　The EFL teacher can also involve students in the discussion of what right books are and create an L2 version of class lists of right books, challenging books, and books to be abandoned.

As Calkins (2001, 339) emphasizes the practical side of encouraging students to read easier books at the beginning, it is also critical for the EFL teacher in Japan to emphasize the importance of choosing easier books.　There are several reasons for this.　Many Japanese students are not used to reading a just-right book.　Rather, they tend to refer to "reading English" as reading challenging texts slowly while analyzing various grammar points and sentence structure.　The amount of reading is incredibly small if students frequently choose challenging texts and read in this way.　Instead of choosing challenging texts and always reading them that way, students need to experience reading a greater amount with solid comprehension.　What students regard as easier texts can serve this purpose well and help them experience reading content rather than analyzing syntax.

There are other habits exhibited by Japanese students which discourage them from reading a greater amount.　This author has witnessed students copying all of the English sentences in their notebooks first, and other students writing all the unfamiliar words as well as their translation of all the sentences in the text.　These practices deprive readers of much of their reading time and discourage them from reading more.　The teacher needs to clarify what she is encouraging and what she is not encouraging.

Next, the teacher instructs students how to select right books.　In L1 teaching, sometimes teachers use the number of unfamiliar words[8] and the running records[9] as criteria for selecting right books.　However, both of these criteria need to be carefully used with L2 students.　Regarding the number of unfamiliar words, phrases that are difficult to understand in L2 often consist of relatively easier, familiar words, for example, "all told," "name calling," "it hits home," and "to name a few."　Using reading aloud as a criterion for comprehension is also difficult for L2 students.　This author has observed students who read the text aloud very fluently yet could not retell anything after reading the passage.　Thus, the number of unfamiliar words or running records are likely to be less accurate in measuring

the comprehension of L2 students.

This author argues that retelling the content and responding to books can be useful criteria for L2 students to choose right books. If students can retell what they have read, that means they more or less understand the content. If students found something in the book to which they would like to respond, that means they have found interest in the book or some aspects that they like in the book. Three to five minutes for each book to determine if they can retell content or not may be enough time to conduct an initial screening.

Before the three-to-five minute initial screening, it is useful for the teacher to show how she approaches different texts differently through thinking aloud. For example, if the teacher reads an article, she shows what to look at first, including the title, headlines, section titles, pictures and charts, captions, and the first paragraph, while talking about what she has been thinking. If the teacher reads a book, she looks at the title and the back cover before reading the first paragraph, and tells students what she has been thinking. During thinking aloud, the teacher also demonstrates how she deals with unfamiliar words. Second, she asks students to try doing the same thing for three to five minutes. Third, she asks students to try to retell to their neighbors what they learned from the reading material that they worked on for three to five minutes. This helps other students to see what other reading materials are available in the classroom. Students decide if they will continue to read the book or not depending upon how much retelling they can do and how well they can respond to the text. The teacher encourages students to abandon a book that they cannot retell well or that they find uninteresting.

Choosing interesting books often poses a challenge in the L2 classroom because of the possibility of a gap between a student's intelligence level and her language proficiency. This is especially true when teaching adult students with low language proficiency. It is not easy to find intellectually challenging texts within an appropriate language proficiency level. There are two possible solutions to this situation. One is, of course, to find intellectually challenging yet accessible texts for their language proficiency. This is not easy, and cannot be achieved immediately, yet teachers need to continue to work on this issue in the longer term. A second possible solution is to create contexts in which students can read books that are not intellectually challenging from different angles, such as critically examining children's literature as a reviewer or looking at a series of books on the same theme or at books by the same author and making this an intellectually challenging author study project.

As Calkins (2001, 121) suggests for L1 teaching, a classroom library in which part of the books are leveled is useful in supporting students in selecting right books. This author too has found that partially categorized baskets of books based upon levels as well as authors and themes are helpful. The leveled baskets support students in finding accessible

books easily.　The author and theme baskets support students in finding books that may satisfy their own interests and curiosity.

2–2.　Expansion of Genres and Upgrading of Levels

　　After students have started to understand that reading without adequate comprehension is not really reading and begin choosing books based upon their comprehension and interests, teachers may try to expand the breadth of right books and raise the students' levels.　Just as in the L1 classroom, the teacher and the students can play important roles as an experienced reader and as fellow readers, respectively.　Similar to the L1 teacher, the EFL teacher can introduce her own reading life and various books that she is reading, and help individual students through conferences.

　　Taking advantage of social aspects of reading among students is another frequently used strategy.　Oral and written book introduction and book discussion among students are powerful tools for learning new books and genres.　Individually, students can orally introduce books to their classmates or provide written book reviews.　Oral book introductions and written book reviews in the classroom have several advantages.　First, these recommendations by other students have social value (Calkins 2001, 39).　Thus students respond to their peers' recommendations differently.　For example, they might try unfamiliar books just because their classmates like them.　Second, students are generally aware of their classmates' language proficiency, and the information about who read which book helps them to grasp the level of the book.　Third, knowing who read which book often generates dialogue between or among students.　If a student is not sure if he would like to read the particular book that the other student recommends, he can talk with that student to acquire further information.　He can also receive help from the recommender when he feels confused.　Students can help each other in book choices and in solving difficult parts of the book.　This is of great value, especially in the reading classroom in Japan where the class size is often large, allowing the teacher to spend more time on individual and small group conferences.

　　Preparing a good oral introduction and a good written review of a book are new experiences for many students.　The teacher shows step by step how to do these introductions and reviews. Otherwise, students often do not understand what book introductions and book reviews are and many of them present only a summary.

　　There are many ways to teach preparation of book introductions and book reviews.　One way is to make it a rule that students record all the texts (the book title or the article title) with their own rating and a short description (ten words or less, or one sentence) of why they rated the book so.　This is a very simply method, but it helps students become accustomed to responding to and evaluating a text.　Students can use this list in the future

when they choose a text for a review. Another way is to demonstrate the difference between summary and review. It may be helpful if the teacher provides both a summary and a review of the same text. The key here is for students to become aware of the audience, as the review is for other people. A third way is to show good reviews written by teachers, former students, and professional reviewers (if available and appropriate). Students may then brainstorm about what should and should not be included in the oral book introduction and the book review.

Easy access to the written book reviews is important. There are two possible methods: book reviews attached to books and book reviews separate from books. In the former, students' reviews are collected and attached to the books, such as by inserting a paper on which several reviews are written. The advantage of this is that several reviews are in front of their eyes. They do not have to expend extra effort to look for reviews. However, once the book is checked out, other students cannot read the reviews, which is a disadvantage. In the latter, book reviews are organized by alphabetical order and set aside. Book reviews are always available, but students must make an effort to look for and read them.

3. Conclusion

Teachers are a model and an experienced reader for students who have begun reading L2 texts with comprehension, interest, and confidence. They can discuss the joys and difficulties of reading English in their lives, share approaches to selecting right books, and show how to expand genres and upgrade levels. And they can nudge individual students toward becoming more independent as readers.

Serafini (2001, 65) states, "Active, lifelong readers choose books for themselves in the same way writers choose their topics to write about." When students are given opportunities to choose books and are taught how to choose, they become more active readers and talk about what they read, recommend books to others, and help others with their reading. They also express their preferences and what they would like to read next, which encourages not only classmates to read new books and new genres, but also teachers. In other words, teaching students to choose right books helps teachers to read more and to grow further, together with students, as a reader and an instructor.

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[1]　In *Teaching Reading in Middle School* (Robb 2000, 66), Robb introduces "Key Reading Strategies." She lists twelve strategies, including select books; make personal connections; visualize; predict/support; confirm/adjust; identify confusing parts; pause, then retell or summarize; self-question; self-monitor; understand text structures (genres); synthesize; and determine what's important.

[2]　In *Conversations* (Routman 2000, 51 Figure 2-6), Routman includes the following items: "1. It's on your reading level. When you read a page you can read most of the words. You understand the book and can tell what it's about. 2. You can use your strategies to figure out words and to understand the book. 3. You know a little bit about the subject or what the book is about. 4. It's not always the same kind of book—you choose among fiction, nonfiction, biographies, poetry, historical fiction, autobiographies. 5. It's not too long for you. 6. It's part of a favorite series."

[3]　For example, Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 149) present the list "Why Readers Abandon Books." The list includes: "too easy; too difficult; boring—not interesting and not going anywhere; not interested in the genre now; too long before the action begins; disappointing sequel; expected something different from this author; don't like the characters; found I didn't like this point of view; too sad; too scary; too confusing; found another book of interest; plot is confusing; print is too hard to read; too similar to another book; not good for now but might go back to it."

[4]　Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 143–145, Figure 9-1) have "Selecting Books and Enjoying Silent Reading," "How Readers Choose Books," and "Making Good Book Choices," for Day 1, Day 2, and Day 3, respectively.

[5]　For examples, see Calkins (2001, 38–39) and Routman (2003, 72–73).

[6]　Items in Fountas and Pinnell's "Ways We Choose Books" are: "front cover/inside jacket; book cover information; characters we've read about in other books; another book in a series; interesting title; great illustrations; authors we know and like; book recommendations from teachers, friends, and critics; books that are movies; genres we like to read; try the beginning; read some of the middle; 'Must-read' rack in our room; new/popular book; sequel to a book we've read; heard it read aloud; read it before and enjoyed it." (Fountas and Pinnell 2001, 147, Figure 9-2).

[7]　Serafini's list "Criteria for Choosing Books to Read" includes: "1. use the teacher's favorites

from previous years; 2. return to familiar favorite, the 'classics'; 3. read other titles from our favorite authors and illustrators; 4. use book review suggestions in newspapers and magazines; 5. rely on word of mouth—suggestions of teachers, friends, and family; 6. browse the school and local library; 7. review the Newbery and Caldecott awards; 8. ask clerks in the local bookstore; 9. read book jackets and advertisements" (Serafini 2001, 64).

8   For example, Goldberg and Serravallo (2007, 33) suggest what they call the "three finger rule." One finger refers to one unfamiliar word, and if students "hold up three fingers before reaching the end of their page, it means the text may be too hard."

9   Calkins (2001, 144–155) describes how teachers use running records, an informal reading inventory, and miscue analysis to analyze reading behaviors.