Literacy Talk among Readers in EFL Classrooms: Book Discussions and Book Introductions

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Abstract

　本論では、外国語リーディング指導において、本について語ることがどのような利点をもたらし、どのような可能性を拓くのかについて考察する。欧米における主に母語でのリーディング指導実践から、学習者を優れた読み手として成長させる過程において、教師が本について語ることの有用性が多面的に認識されていることが分かる。筆者らは、それらの認識を踏まえ、本について語ることは、外国語教育においても読み手を育てる有用な方法であると論じ、段階を追った方法を二つの側面から検討する。一つは同じ本について語ることであり、もう一つは、ある本を他の読み手に紹介するという活動である。前者は、優れた読者の読み方を学び、多角的な視点で解釈し理解を深める、後者は他の読者を意識しながら様々な読み方で読む、読む範囲を広げる、選書のスキルを身につけるといった能力を培う可能性を論じる。母語でのリーディングにおいても、外国語としての英語リーディングにおいても、その重要性や必要性には、共通する部分は多いと考えるからである。

Introduction

　Talking about books with other readers is one aspect of the lives of many proficient readers. These readers sometimes learn different ways of reading and of interpreting the same book from other readers. Other times they learn about new books from other readers and expand their reading repertoires. Discussions of books among readers are often voluntary, lively, and engaging. Atwell (1998, 32) describes such talks as "filled with jokes, arguments, stories, exchange of bits of information, descriptions of what we love and hate and why."

　The past several decades have seen the development of classroom practices of talking about

books especially in L1 settings. When conversing about the same books, students are encouraged to explore their ideas and create new meanings, rather than finding one "correct" answer or the teacher's version of interpretation. Calkins (2001, 246) argues that "one goal of a book talk is to open our ideas to those of others, which will often refine or alter our original ideas." The other important aspect of talking about books lies in learning about new books and genres through book introductions by classmates. Those who hear recommendations often become interested in new books and genres. Those who prepare book introductions learn to read (or re-read) books differently with awareness of their audience.

The authors argue that both aspects of literacy talk (talking about the same books and introducing different books to each other) greatly contribute to the growth of EFL learners as readers. This paper explores the possibilities and benefits of literacy talk in EFL reading instruction. First, the authors provide a brief explanation of discussing the same books in L1 classrooms, and their adaptations into EFL reading instruction follow. Second, the authors look at book introductions by classmates in L1 classrooms, and its adaptations in EFL reading instruction follow. Lastly, the value of infusing such talk into EFL reading instruction is summarized and discussed.

Book Discussions: Talking about the Same Books

Many educators recognize the complex nature of reading and generating meanings in reading. Reading entails more than retelling, answering questions, and learning new words, which are insufficient for comprehension (Keene 2008, 5). Further, reading is "an active process of making meaning" (Weaver 1990, 201). Educators and researchers see the possibility of talk for successful reading and intellectual development. Calkins (2001, 226) writes, "It is rare to hear teachers discuss their efforts to teach students to talk well. Yet, talk, like reading and writing, is a major motor—I could even say the major motor—of intellectual development." Barnes' distinction between exploratory talk and presentational talk is useful to understand the quality of talk. He states that exploratory talk "enables the speaker to try out ideas, to hear how they sound, to see what others make of them, to arrange information and ideas into different patterns" (Barnes 2008, 5), while "presentational talk is a 'final draft' for display and evaluation" and "frequently occurs in response to teachers' questions" for testing (Barnes 2008, 6-7). Acknowledging literacy talk as crucial for students' development as readers (Atwell 1998, 40), Atwell calls for reader-to-reader dialogue in order to grow as readers, which "was a far cry from empty lesson-plan questions and sterile book-report answers" (Atwell 1998, 34).

Such talk or reader-to-reader dialogue does not effectively happen without the teacher's

intervention in students' reading. Atwell (1998, 40) points out that sustained silent reading itself is not enough because "[e]asy, obvious choices, such as series of novels, come to set the literary tone, and reading and literacy abilities don't develop." And she emphasizes the importance of the teacher's intervention as a resourceful and responsive reader.

Read-Aloud, Interactive Read-Aloud, Think Aloud, and Reader-to-Reader Dialogue in L1 Classrooms

Educators have introduced several reading practices for different levels in terms of student responsibility. Read-aloud is recognized as a starting step in the Release of Responsibility Model adopted by Nichols (2006, 53, Figure 5-1). Calkins provides details about her "curriculum of talk" (2001, 225-247), and states that the talk curriculum "begins with whole-class book talks about the read-aloud, and moves students toward talking about the books they read independently" (2001, 227). The teacher's read-aloud creates a basis upon which the teacher can lead book talks about the read-aloud, or what Routman (2003, 52) calls interactive read-aloud. The teacher can invite students to respond to the book during the reading, which helps "students make meaning as the story unfolds" (Routman 2003, 52). This invitation to responding to the books can be done in a whole group or in pairs of students. Short and Jerome with Burke (1996, 513-515) introduce an activity that they call "Say Something." They (Short and Jerome with Burke 1996, 514) explain, "The teacher reads aloud, stopping at particular points. Students are encouraged to 'say something' and after several comments the teacher begins reading again." Calkins suggests several possible starter phrases, including, "I noticed ...," "One thing I pictured was ...," "It reminds me of ...," "I like the part in which ... (or I didn't like)," and others (Calkins 2001, 231-232) so that students can easily begin talking.

Interactive read-aloud can be combined with a teacher's think-aloud. Routman (2003, 52) suggests, "The teacher may also make her own thinking visible to students while reading aloud, especially if it's a complex text with many new concepts." Keene (2008, 68) employs think-aloud to teach comprehension strategy, stating that "using a provocative text, read aloud, pausing occasionally to think aloud—to show them exactly how we use the comprehension strategy we want to use in their reading." As Keene and Zimmerman (2007, 146) argue, think-aloud allows students to observe how understanding comes about.

Read-aloud, interactive read-aloud, and think-aloud create contexts in which the teacher shows models and invites students to respond to and talk about books with the assistance of the teacher. These activities become a basis for students to discuss books more independently, including partner reading (Nichols 2006, 91-94) and book clubs (Calkins 2001, 395-427). Throughout the

process, the teacher shows models as a reader, confers with students, encourages students to talk with each other as readers, and gradually releases responsibility to students (Benson cited in Allen 2009, 77; Routman 2003, back cover; and Nichols 2006, 53).

Read-Aloud, Interactive Read-Aloud, and Think Aloud, and Reader-to-Reader Dialogue in EFL Classrooms

The authors argue that read-aloud is also an effective beginning in EFL talk curriculum in reading classes, inviting students to experience the joy of reading regardless of their age. Short picture books carefully selected are highly recommended even for adult learners. At this stage it is important to find easy-to-follow picture books that have short sentences and/or repeated patterns. The ability of many EFL students to understand the text through listening is lower than most teachers expect, even with the assistance of pictures. Showing pages using the overhead projector during the read-aloud helps, as students can see the printed words. Yet, it will still be challenging to follow the read-aloud especially for those students who have developed the habit of understanding each English sentence by translating it into their L1 language, a practice which is common among many Japanese students.

A picture book that works well early in the semester in the authors' beginning-level classes is William Bee's *Whatever.* This book has a simple structured pattern and an unexpected, black-humored, and puzzling ending. This book often invites spontaneous responses among students, which creates a smooth transition to interactive read-aloud. Other titles which often work well are Marjorie Newman's *Mole and the Baby Bird* and Hans Whelm's *I Always Love You.* The story lines of these two books carry no surprises. With simple language, they deal with themes shared by readers of many ages: the former text discusses unselfish love and the latter text suggests the importance of saying "I love you" at a given present moment while someone (a pet dog, in this book) is alive.

Once students are comfortable following stories through read-aloud, the teacher introduces interactive read-aloud. To prepare interactive read-aloud, the teacher chooses where to pause and what to say to the students at each pause, such as "Predict what might happen next," "Discuss why this happens," or "Tell anything that comes to mind." Some of the picture books that work well in the authors' classes include Anthony Browne's *Willy the Wimp*, Peter H. Reynolds' *So Few of Me,* and Leo Lionni's *In the Rabbit Garden* for predicting what might happen next and interpreting the last scene.

The EFL teacher must decide if she wants students to respond to the books in their target language or in their L1. If students are comfortable with saying short English sentences, the

authors recommend that the teacher encourage students to respond in the target language, while providing them with "starter phrases" in English. They provide students with both a framework of ideas and languages to express their thoughts. The authors select several starter phrases from the phrases listed by Calkins (Calkins 2001, 231-232) and Fountas and Pinnell (Fountas and Pinnell 2001, 285), and make them visible for students either through an overhead projector or by printing them on a small card for each pair. The authors, however, believe that the main objective for the interactive read-aloud should be responding to books, rather than practicing starter phrases or speaking the target language. For that reason the authors encourage students at the beginning level to talk in their L1 to their neighboring students when the teacher pauses.

Although interactive read-aloud is a good way to learn and experience what responding to books is like, it is sometimes useful to ask EFL students to retell the story when the teacher pauses. Retelling helps students to confirm or correct their understanding. The authors observe that retelling in a small group in their L1 works well for their low intermediate students. However, retelling well is not necessarily enough for exploring ideas. In other words, retelling and responding to books are different, and serve two different purposes. The teacher can use think-aloud and show how she retells and how she explores, showing two different ways of reading.

The authors find that think-aloud is useful to demonstrate various other skills and strategies that the teacher uses, including what Tovani (2000, 50-56) refers to as "fix-up strategies." It creates a good forum to show how to solve problems relating to issues of L2 reading. For example, the authors utilize think-aloud for showing when and how to use dictionaries, how to make use of grammar knowledge of the target language, how to find set phrases, how and when to use post-its, or when to mark texts when allowed. If English is the teacher's L2, texts that challenge the teacher herself language-wise work well in the authors' classrooms, as EFL students must deal with solving L2-related problems and creating meanings at the same time. Dealing with texts of different genres and showing how to make meanings differently depending upon genres are good items to introduce to students through think-aloud.

Read-aloud, interactive read-aloud, and think-aloud help EFL students to form a basis for talking about books more independently. The authors recommend that the teacher guide and assist students to choose books whose language is easy and yet engages them in reading. Titles that work in the authors' classes include Shel Silverstein's *The Missing Piece* and *The Giving Tree*, both of which have themes adult readers can discuss. Similarly, Peter H. Reynolds' several books and stories including *The North Star*, *The Dot*, *Ish*, *Sky Color*, and "Playing from the Heart" have themes to which adult readers can relate. *Michael Rosen's Sad Book*, based upon a

true story, treats the passing of a beloved son, Cynthia Rylant's *Scarecrow* and Jon J. Muth's *The Three Questions* often interest students in pondering what people can offer in life. Eve Bunting's *Smoky Night*, *The Wall*, and *Fly Away Home* encourage students to look at such social issues as the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the Vietnam War, and homelessness, respectively, and to examine their educational values for children from adults' points of view.

There are many other titles that work well in the classroom. The authors use many picture books. Some of the reasons resonate with what Serafini states as the reasons for using picture books on a daily basis in his L1 classrooms, including that "[p]icture books are concise, highly interactive pieces of literature" (Serafini 2001, 59) and "the wide variety of themes and topics can be shared through this medium" (Serafini 2001, 60).

Inviting EFL students to conversations that are open for new dialogues is not easy. Most students are not accustomed to such conversations and frequently try to find "correct answers" or interpretations that the teacher wants. Jointly creating new ideas may not always happen, either. However, responding to and exploring the same books through talking and listening to others' interpretations is the first step toward creating meanings. Students frequently surprise their teachers (the authors of this article) with their interpretations and pointing out what their teachers did not notice.

Book Introductions

Book Introductions: Recommending Books in L1 Classrooms

In many L1 classrooms where students have choices for their independent reading materials, they are often given opportunities to review and recommend books to classmates, sometimes having "time for readers to go around the circle and describe their books to classmates" (Atwell 1998, 37). Book introductions to classmates help students to become interested in trying new books or new genres as books have social value (Calkins 2001, 39). An underlying assumption is based upon a social aspect of reading. Calkins (2001, 4) writes, "If we simply ask people 'What are you reading in your independent reading today?' and then, 'Is there something social behind the book? Was it recommended by someone? Is it a part of a conversation with someone?,' it soon becomes clear that our so-called 'independent' reading lives are not independent after all."

Serravallo and Goldberg (2007, 10) encourage students to select books that are suitable for them because book selection is necessary for becoming independent readers. Listening to book introductions by others not only expands students' reading repertoires, it also develops the ability to make good use of book introductions. Students do not blindly accept recommendations by

others; rather, they select information so that they may find next books that they can most likely read and enjoy.

Book introductions are also beneficial for those who prepare the introductions. Allen (2009, 62-75) powerfully discusses the significance of students becoming flexible in thinking in response to the purposes and to the audience. He (Allen 2009, 74) argues, "It seems to me that if we help our students become flexible in the process of metacognition by helping them move flexibly through texts for a wide variety of purposes, they will, indeed, become more successful and inspired readers." Preparing book introductions gives students the opportunity to be aware of the audience for reading and expand their ways of reading.

Book introductions also offer the view of those students who recommend books. Chambers (1996, 22) states that the basis of criticism of books is that "reader's own experience of the text." In other words, students who read books recommended by classmates interact with the classmate's experience of the text, which enriches their reading experiences.

Book Introductions: Recommending Books in EFL Classrooms

The authors argue that book introductions are beneficial in EFL classrooms for both students who recommend books and those who listen to the recommendations. The process of preparing book introductions involves reading (and re-reading) books. Students select and synthesize information and sometimes look for good sentences to quote for their presentations. This process activates such reading strategies as synthesizing information and determining the most important ideas, both of which are part of the seven reading strategies identified by Zimmerman and Hutchins (2003, 5-6). Other reading strategies or strategic reading may be incorporated, including making connections (Harvey and Goudvis 2000, 21) and using background knowledge (Zimmerman and Hutchins 2003, 6) when students want to mention other books with similar themes for comparison or when they wish to add background information about the authors or the themes.

The authors have two suggestions for when the teacher introduces book recommendations to EFL students. First, the teacher makes clear what a good book introduction is. For many EFL students, recommending books to others is a new experience, and some students provide only a summary of the book. A strategy that the authors find useful is showing a summary and a review from the same book, emphasizing that the review is to help other readers (Kosaka 2012, 61). The authors sometimes use an extremely short picture book, such as David Shannon's *No, David!* (which has only sixty words in the text) and ask students to write a summary and a review. When students introduce books to others, they should be encouraged to talk based upon the review

rather than upon the summary. Or, the authors show good reviews written by teachers, students, and others, and ask students to brainstorm about what should and should not be included in a book introduction (Kosaka 2012, 61). Second, the authors encourage students to show the book and even open a few pages when introducing the text. These actions help other students to remember the books.

Listening to book introductions, EFL students can learn about new books, new authors, and new genres from their classmates. Books recommended through the book introductions are often checked out immediately. In addition, students acquire information about the books before reading, which leads to successful completion of the books more frequently than when reading books without any information. Also, students know that if they have problems or questions, they can talk with those who introduced the books (Kosaka, 2012, 60).

Conclusion

Reader-to-reader dialogue on books has been widely practiced and explored in L1 reading classrooms. The importance of the teacher intervention in book talks has been recognized in L2 settings, as well. For example, Day and Bamford (1998), who are strong advocates of the inclusion of extensive reading in second language instruction, present teacher read-aloud (130) and book talks (137) as effective ways to build a community of readers, and answering questions, writing summaries, writing reaction reports, or presenting oral book reports as follow-up activities to reading (140-155).

The authors argue that such intervention should be explored further in EFL classrooms. They conclude that talking about books encourages EFL readers to focus on and develop underutilized aspects of their reading skills. Read-aloud and interactive read-aloud encourage students to follow, process, and respond to the story as a whole, rather than to understand the text sentence by sentence. Think-aloud shows students how a proficient reader interacts with the text. Through talking about the same books with classmates and teachers, they modify their comprehension, create their own questions, learn new interpretations, and explore meanings. Introducing and recommending books to others encourages students to read texts differently while activating available reading strategies. Listening to book introductions expands their reading repertoires, interacts with the classmate's experience of the text to enrich reading, and develops book selection skills.

These practices are not new for proficient readers in their real reading lives. Such readers often talk about the same books and introduce new books to others voluntarily and happily. Yet, often times EFL teachers do not teach what they do and what they enjoy in their real reading lives.

Instead, they devote the major part of their reading instruction to what they do not do in real reading, including answering the text questions, memorizing phrases and words, and identifying all the words in the texts. The authors conclude that incorporating dialogues, discussions, and introductions about books into EFL classrooms can help the EFL reading instruction become closer to reading in real lives, provide EFL students with opportunities to read and think in the target language in meaningful ways, facilitate L2 acquisition, and help the EFL students to learn what they might like to continue after completing the course. Such a way of teaching also grows teachers as readers, as it encourages teachers to continue reading, looking for engaging texts in various genres, and interacting with other readers, including students. Although the authors see rich potential in literacy talks in EFL reading instruction, we are still in the initial stages of classroom practice and hope to build upon further practices and to bring more researchers and practitioners into dialogue in this field.

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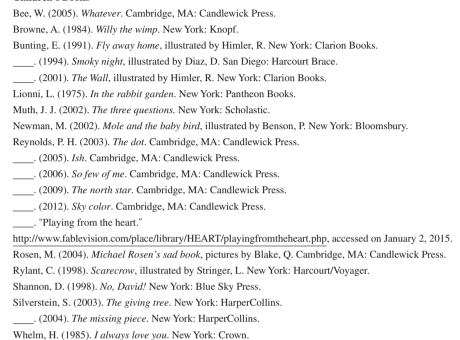
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