

Student Choice in EFL Reading Instruction: Whole Class Teaching that Supports Individual Choices by Students

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Abstract

何を読むのかという選択とそのサポートは、日本における外国語としての英語教育では十分に検討されているとはいえない分野である。他方、主に母語話者へのリーディング教育においては、特にリーディング・ワークショップが行われている教室では、選択の大切さが認識され、それぞれの読み手に合った選書ができること、それぞれが選んだものをよりよく読めるようにサポートすることが大切にされている。そのような教室では、個々の学習者を個別あるいは小グループで対応する時間が授業の中核におかれているが、授業自体は教師がクラス全体に教える時間で始まることが多い。本論では、読むことにおける選択に関わる指導の中の、クラス全体に教える時間に焦点をあてる。特に「何を読むのか」という「読み物の選択」に関わる部分と、「どのように読むのか」という「読み方の選択」に関わる部分に分けて検討し、その両面から日本における外国語としての英語リーディング教育に応用できる部分を考察する。

Introduction

The recipient of the 2015 Global Teacher Prize, Nancie Atwell, articulated in a PBS interview (2015) that “[a]nybody's achievement is driven by interest.”¹ And she stated elsewhere that same year that “student choice is synonymous with student *engagement*” (emphasis in original) (Atwell 2015, 21). These comments may seem to reflect common sense, as teachers are aware from their experiences that engagement with the texts is closely related to their favorite genres and to interesting topics. A major part of EFL reading instruction, however, lies in reading the textbook of the teacher's choice, frequently in one genre or a few limited genres. Encouraging, nurturing, and assisting student choice are neither main practices nor frequently explored topics among EFL reading teachers in Japan.

The importance of student choice in reading instruction has been widely recognized and

practiced in L1 classrooms where reading workshops are conducted. For example, Atwell (2015, 21) states that her students become “avid, skilled readers because they decide what they will read.” Many other educators offer examples of teaching students to select “right” books and to abandon books when necessary.²

Reading workshop educators who value student choice sometimes use texts which they have selected to teach the whole class as well as to individually support and respond to students with books of their own choice. In other words, each session consists of both whole class instruction and individualized instruction. The whole class instruction is often referred to as mini-lessons and typically is conducted at the beginning of each session. The individualized instruction usually occurs in the individual reading time that follows a mini-lesson. During the time after the mini-lesson, the teacher responds to individual readers and supports them through conferences and other approaches.³ Thus, the teaching framework is neither everyone reading the same text all the time nor is it everyone reading different texts all the time.

Although conferences and responses to individual students are the key elements in a reading workshop, this paper examines aspects of whole class instruction that support the wise choices of students and their reading of books of their choice. Whole class instruction provides students with bases and references. This paper explores how EFL reading instruction may incorporate such whole class instruction so that the teacher may help students to develop skills and knowledge that they can utilize for their independent reading. Such skills and knowledge are critical for EFL readers, because the more independently EFL readers can read, the greater the quantity and the higher the quality of reading they will accomplish.

This paper focuses on two areas of whole class instruction related to student choice primarily from the L1 reading workshop and discusses implications for EFL reading instruction in Japan. The first section discusses topics directly related to student book selection, in other words, what to read. And the second section considers how to read, which includes reading strategies, flexibility in reading, and unlearning of certain reading habits.

1. Whole Class Instruction Regarding What to Read

1-1. Teaching What to Read in an L1 Classroom

This section first examines whole class instruction regarding what to read in an L1 reading workshop. It then explores obstacles to and suggestions for EFL reading instruction in Japan.

Three points are selected in whole class instruction regarding the choosing of what to read in L1 reading workshop classrooms.

First, the physical environment of the classroom, which includes book selection by the teacher, book placement by genre and other criteria, and book availability, greatly affects student choices. Many educators offer lists of appropriate books for students,⁴ as they are fully aware of the importance for students to read books that they love and comprehend. They work hard to match students with right books as quickly as possible. Purposefully placing books in the classroom is helpful for leading students to interesting books that are not too difficult.⁵ Classroom books are rearranged occasionally depending upon the unit of study or the focus of the curriculum, such as poetry or non-fiction. And, the availability of a certain number of books is important. Educators offer practical advice to increase the number of books in the classroom.⁶

Second, recommendations from classmates are valued and well taken advantage of by other students. Teachers provide students with many opportunities to present books that they wish to recommend to each other. Kosaka and Nagasaki (2015, 56-58) emphasize the value of book recommendations for both those who recommend and those who listen to the recommendations. Accordingly, a classroom library may also include short recommendations or reviews by other students and a section for popular books in the class.

Third, concepts of “right books” are often discussed, which includes abandoning books when necessary.⁷ Fountas and Pinnell state on their Levelled Books Website, “Matching books to readers provides opportunities to process texts that are not too difficult or too easy, allowing the reader to learn from the text.”⁸ Teachers sometimes show how to balance the genre when necessary (Sibberson and Szymusiak 2008, 116-117). Learning how a teacher, who is a proficient reader, reads materials of different levels and genres helps students to construct images of skilled readers.⁹

1-2. Implications of Teaching What to Read for EFL Reading Instruction

The physical environment of the classroom discussed above poses apparent difficulties in EFL reading instruction in Japan. An obvious obstacle lies in availability of books in the classroom. Having a good classroom library of English books is not common in many Japanese classrooms at any grade level, but especially after elementary school. In junior high school, high school, and college, a teacher usually visits classrooms, rather than students visiting a teacher's classroom. Carrying a variety of books to each classroom each time is difficult. And arranging books to

support purposeful book choices is not realistic. Unless there is a good student-friendly library or an “English-language classroom” where a good selection of English-language books are placed in a way that supports student choice, it may seem pointless to discuss how to teach student choice.

Moreover, even when teachers have a good physical setting, a good environment by itself will not be sufficient for students to learn choosing well. In other words, simply purchasing sets of books and stacking them in the classroom (or carrying them to the classroom each time) are not equivalent to teaching book choice and do not encourage students to read books of their choice independently. Carefully planning lessons that assist students to wisely select what to read and to skillfully decide how to read is indispensable.

An EFL teacher needs both 1) on-going effort to increase accessible reading materials and 2) the creation of lessons that teach how to wisely select reading materials. It is not either one or the other. Otherwise, EFL teachers will continue not to teach book choice. Regarding the creation of lessons and teaching how to select what to read, Kosaka (2012) argues that selecting books is an important, teachable skill and summarizes and introduces what a teacher can do. Kosaka and Nagasaki (2015, 56-58) also discuss how to tap into student recommendations to each other to assist in a student's book choices. Regarding continuing efforts to increase reading materials for selection, some practical suggestions will be offered below.

First, if a teacher can ask the library to purchase books, choose several authors that students may like and request several books by each author in order to make good use of a limited budget. If the budget allows thirty paperback books, for example, request five books from six authors, rather than thirty books by thirty different authors. (Buying series of books may not be recommended if the library budget is small. Some series require students to read in a specific order, which creates problems of accessibility. Also, other series, such as the Magic Treehouse series written by Mary Pope Osborne,¹⁰ consist of many books and may easily consume much of the budget.) A teacher then introduces a book and shows that other books by that author also are in the school library.

For the purpose of such book introductions, picture books work well even for older students, as they can be used in a relatively short time and illustrations help students to process the entire book.¹¹ A key is to find authors and books that the teacher enjoys reading and can introduce with joy so that the positive feeling toward reading can become contagious. Regarding picture books, the present author's school library has five or more different titles by certain authors, including Anthony Browne, John Burningham, Chris Van Allsburg, Eve Bunting, Peter H. Reynolds, Tomie dePaola, Shaun Tan, and Byrd Baylor, in addition to many series. For more advanced students,

the school library has longer books for young and young adult readers. Authors whose books of five different titles or more are in the library include Katherine Paterson, Kate DiCamillo, Patricia Maclachlan, Sharon Creech, Cynthia Rylant, Avi, and Louis Sachar. Some authors, such as Cynthia Rylant and Kate DiCamillo, write extensively across different levels, and this may encourage students to continue to read books at different levels by the same author.

In addition to making requests to the library, a teacher can take advantage of reading materials available on the Internet. Regarding picture book read-aloud, the Screen Actors Guild Foundation Storyline Online homepage¹² presents an excellent selection of books read by actresses and actors. Their read-aloud is intriguing. The number of books is modest and thus not overwhelming for students and teachers. Readers can choose to listen to the read-aloud with or without English subtitles. Some books, such as *Guji Guji*¹³ by Chih-Yuan Chen, are easy enough for low intermediate students, while other books present social issues and require certain background knowledge for older students to pursue further, such as *White Socks Only*¹⁴ by Evelyn Coleman.

To add different genre reading to children's books, the Author Interviews section on the Reading Rockets homepage¹⁵ may increase students' understanding and appreciation of children's books. Interviews of more than 100 children's book authors and illustrators¹⁶ may be viewed, and interview transcripts are available. This site is aimed mainly at educators and parents, and thus is appropriate for older students whose English levels are intermediate or higher. Combining author studies with books may encourage mixed-genre reading, as well.

There are many other sites that are helpful for covering different reading genres. For example, a wide range of genres are available at the Lit2Go homepage.¹⁷ Recently, EFL instructors frequently utilize the TED homepage¹⁸ for fascinating presentations. There are also many excellent poetry sites, including the Poetry 180 homepage¹⁹ hosted by Billy Collins, the United States Poet Laureate, 2001-2003.

However, simply listing good homepages and letting students access them without assistance does not work effectively. Without teaching students how to select interesting reading materials at appropriate levels, the finding of interesting reading materials by students depends largely upon luck or chance. The more reading materials that are available on a homepage or in a library, the greater the guidance regarding how to select reading materials is required. In other words, teachers need to plan lessons that help students learn how to find right materials and when to abandon them, and at the same time, take advantage of recommendations by classmates. Many of the lessons of choosing well in L1 reading workshop are adaptable to EFL reading instruction. Kosaka (2012) introduces ways that several educators teach and their implications for an EFL classroom.

2. *Whole Class Instruction Regarding How to Read*

2-1. *Teaching How to Read in L1 Classroom*

In order to support students to read books of their choice, the teaching of choosing what to read is one area, as discussed above. Another area is the teaching of choosing how to read so that students may carry such skills and knowledge to reading books of their choice. Teachers select texts to highlight a specific way of strategic reading and, accordingly, what Tovani (2000, 50-56) refers to as “fix-up strategies” to handle confusing parts in order to construct meaning. This section focuses on whole class instruction regarding how to read. Three critical areas discussed here are engagement in the texts, identifying confusing parts (and solving confusing parts), and flexibility in reading.

First, regarding engagement in reading, Calkins (2001, 60) states that there are many ways to demonstrate the proficient reader's habits, and “the single most important habit we need to model is engagement in the text.” This comment is profound, because there are many reading strategies that students can utilize, yet teaching strategies themselves should not be the goal. As Tovani (2000, 107) points out, “strategies are intentional plans that enable readers to construct meaning.” Readers are engaged in texts while constructing meaning. Demonstrating students to be engaged in texts is an effective way to show a model. Calkins (2001, 57) describes how a read-aloud by a teacher presents a model and creates an experience among children for thoughtful, responsive reading. She (Calkins 2001, 57) writes, “Readers gasp at the scary parts, feel a growing suspense as the plot thickens, say ‘hmmm’ when a new character or a new twist in the plot emerges out of nowhere.”

Second, finding confusing parts is an important step for students as they apply appropriate reading strategies for comprehension. Tovani (2000, 35) describes a student who refuses to monitor his own comprehension. She (Tovani 2000, 37-38, 48) then shows how she teaches students to monitor their own comprehension and to recognize when they are confused, offering specific behaviors which suggest that students should repair meaning.²⁰

Related to finding confusing parts, Fox (2008, 115-116) suggests that students need to choose books that they can quickly read. She (Fox, 2008, 115) explains, “We struggle word by word, and by the time we've worked out one word, we've forgotten what we have already read.” Further, “the slowness of our progress overloads our memory and blocks out meaning” (Fox, 2008, 116). Atwell (1998, 206-207) mentions how a slow reader and a fast reader stop their eyes differently. Fox and Atwell seem to suggest, although from different contexts, that reading the texts in

chunks, not by word by word, is a useful skill. If students read texts word by word, it will be difficult to identify where meaning breaks down.

Third, reading different texts differently depending upon purposes and genres is critical. Tovani (2000, 25-26) describes how setting purposes changes reading. Allen (2009, 66) discusses the importance of flexibility in thinking and reading depending upon purpose and audience. Robb (2000, 66) considers how to make good use of the understanding about text structures (genres) as important strategies. Having a repertoire of skills for approaching texts differently is essential when students deal with a variety of texts.

2-2. *Implications of Teaching How to Read for EFL Reading Instruction*

Engagement in texts is a frequently forgotten element of EFL reading, yet it is what makes reading enjoyable. The teacher can share his/her experiences of being in the “reading zone” (Atwell, 2007). Or the teacher showing a model of engagement through good read-aloud, as discussed above by Calkins, can be a useful lesson. Atwell (2005, 21), who reads aloud one poem each day to students states, “One *never* in my poetry repertoire is *never read a poem aloud cold*” (emphasis in original). Kosaka and Nagasaki (2015: 53-54) briefly introduce several educators who use read-aloud and interactive read-aloud to help students to respond to texts. Modeling thoughtful and responsive reading may be combined with introducing good library books or interesting reading materials that students may like, as well.

Identifying confusing parts and selecting ways to handle such parts are important skills for EFL readers, as well. As Tovani suggests above, teaching students to monitor their comprehension is an effective lesson. Appropriate texts for this practice are short and not too challenging in terms of vocabulary, yet contain difficult parts that consist of familiar words. Simple sentences that demand background knowledge or inferences also create good lessons. Some EFL students tend to think that if they recognize all the words they will understand. These students tend not to monitor their comprehension when all the words are identified, and do not notice when meaning breaks down. In other words, students need to learn to identify at least two levels of problems, the meaning of unknown words and phrases and the breakdown of meaning, and utilize appropriate strategies accordingly.

An EFL teacher may show how s/he approaches the text to identify confusing parts, including how to look at the whole text first to predict what the text is about, how to guess the meanings of unknown words, or how to mark the parts where meanings break down. When students start to identify confusing parts, show them various tools and strategies for solving them. For example,

the teacher may show how s/he uses a variety of online dictionary tools,²¹ and search tools and in what order. Image search, too, should be included as a useful tool. For example, it takes a long time to find the Japanese names of unusual plants or animals, yet finding photographs or images on the Internet is usually very simple. Or, the teacher can show how s/he acquires background knowledge or make inferences.

This leads to the third point, flexibility in reading depending upon genres and purposes. Students need to determine how much time and energy they should spend to solve unknown animal names, for example. Sometimes, it is enough to recognize that the unknown word means some kind of wild animal, while at other times it is necessary to find the Japanese translation.

Teaching how to read also requires some unlearning of English reading practices among EFL students. When students are asked how to read English texts, some list one or two underdeveloped ways of processing and approaching reading materials, such as reading from the first line and reading line by line, or immediately checking all unfamiliar words. Such students tend to read texts in the same way regardless of length or genre. Unlearning the few reading processes that students always use may be difficult yet necessary. They need to learn that proficient readers are flexible in thinking, as Allen discussed above, and that good readers select appropriate reading strategies. Tovani (2000, 107) points out that reading strategies are “flexible and can be adapted to meet the demands of the material.” Showing how to read by conducting think-aloud is a good way for students to listen to “a proficient reader's internal running conversation” (Daniels and Steineke 2013, 31).²²

The teacher's demonstration of a variety of ways to process texts is useful. As L1 educators suggest above, his/her demonstration includes selecting reading strategies depending upon the demand of the materials, purposes, and audience, and taking advantage of text structure knowledge. Dealing with different lengths is another useful way to process texts. Many EFL students are not accustomed to reading long passages, and skimming, skipping, or utilizing knowledge of genres are often new, less-practiced topics.

Conclusion

“Teaching the reader, not the reading” is a significant concept when we consider the whole class instruction of L1 reading workshop regarding book choice. Calkins (2001, 101), reflecting upon her success in writing workshops, questions, “If a teacher's interaction with a *writer* is meant to alter all the work the student does after the interaction is over, then why wouldn't a teacher's interaction with a *reader* also be directed towards altering how a student reads after the

interaction is over?” (emphasis in original). This phrase resonates with what Tovani (2000, 39) states regarding her encounters with students who do not understand the text. “I had a decision to make: teach the reading or the reader? I chose to teach the reader, trusting that if I focused on process content would emerge.” Both educators made a choice to teach the reader.

Looking at choices from what to read and how to read resonates with the shift from “teaching the reading” to “teaching the reader,” as choice is not limited to what to read. In fact, an independent reader constantly makes many choices including why, when, where, for whom, and with whom to read, as well as what and how to read. A reader constantly makes choices in various areas, which reminds us of what Fletcher and Portalupi say about writers. They (Fletcher and Portalupi 2001, 37) state, “A writer is someone who makes decisions.” Incorporating choices in EFL instruction sheds light on creating room for students to make choices and decisions. In the PBS interview introduced at the beginning of this paper, Atwell connects working on choices with “real curiosity, real passion, a real sense of motivation.”²³

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This paper develops from and expands upon parts of the author's joint presentation with Tamiko Hanaoka, "Nurturing Student Choice and Initiative in EFL Reading and Writing Instruction," in the "What Teachers Learn From Their Learners" forum at the 41st Annual International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning and Educational Materials Exhibition held at Shizuoka Convention and Arts Center "Granship," Shizuoka, Japan, on November 22, 2015. The author is deeply thankful to Tamiko Hanaoka for her insights while preparing the presentation.

1 PBS Newshour. "'World's Best Teacher' Does Not Believe in Tests and Quizzes," <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/worlds-best-teacher-believe-tests-quizzes/>, April 29, 2015, accessed on January 2, 2016.

2 Some examples of selecting "right books" and abandoning books by educators, such as Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 143-148), Routman (2001, 51) and Atwell (1998, 116; 133-139) are briefly introduced in Kosaka (2012, 55-56).

3 For example, Calkins (2001, 66) explains that during the reading time, teachers "confer, lead guided reading groups, and do strategy lessons." Atwell (1998, 262-298) describes how she uses written conversations with students regarding books, and touches upon a wide range of topics she discusses with her students individually.

4 For example, regarding adolescent literature, Atwell (1998, 507-518) offers a list of "Favorite Adolescent Literature" and "Favorite Collections of Poetry." For younger readers, Blass (2002) published a guide for recently published fiction and nonfiction titles for booktalking, bookwalking, and reading aloud for grades K-6. This book list categorizes books in language arts and literature, mathematics and science, social studies, and arts and recreation.

5 For example, Calkins (2001, 26-39) describes how to organize a classroom library. Collins (2008, 174-175) suggests that a comprehensive K-3 classroom library contain the following categories of baskets: baskets of leveled books that represent the range of learners, baskets of books representing various genres, baskets of books gathered around topics, baskets of books featuring individual authors, baskets of books arranged by series or character, baskets of books that support the work of the current unit of study, baskets of texts other than books, baskets of "kids' picks," baskets of shared reading texts and emergent storybooks, baskets of books the teacher has read aloud, and baskets containing materials and tools readers need. Sarravallo and Goldberg (2007, 19-22) also describe the organizing of the classroom library.

6 For example, Calkins (2001, 33) offers six practical suggestions to increase books in the classroom. Routman (2003, 67-68) provides nine practical suggestions to build a library collection.

7 Please see endnote 2.

8 Fountas, Irene C and Gay Su Pinnell. "Levelled Books Website,"

<http://www.fountasandpinnelleveledbooks.com/default.aspx>, accessed on January 2, 2016.

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- 9 For example, Calkins (2001, 23) describes a scene in which a school principal visits a classroom and shows the contents of her book bag.
- 10 As of 2014, the series includes more than fifty titles.
- 11 Kosaka and Nagasaki (2015: 54) describe the value of using picture books for read-aloud in EFL classrooms.
- 12 <http://www.storylineonline.net/>, accessed on January 2, 2016.
- 13 <http://www.storylineonline.net/guji-guji/>, accessed on January 4, 2016.
- 14 <http://www.storylineonline.net/white-socks-only/>, accessed on January 4, 2016.
- 15 <http://www.readingrockets.org/>, accessed on January 3, 2016.
- 16 <http://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews>, accessed on January 3, 2016.
- 17 <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/>, accessed on January 4, 2016.
- 18 <https://www.ted.com/>, accessed on January 4, 2016.
- 19 <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>, accessed on January 5, 2016.
- 20 Tovani (2000, 37-38, 48) lists the following six behaviors: “The inner voice inside the reader's head stops its conversation with the text, and the reader only hears his voice pronouncing the words; the camera inside the reader's head shuts off, and the reader can no longer visualize what is happening as she reads; the reader's mind begins to wander and he catches himself thinking about something far removed from the text; the reader cannot remember or retell what she has read; the reader is not getting his clarifying questions answered; and characters are reappearing in the text and the reader doesn't recall who they are.”
- 21 For example, Weblio (<http://translate.webl.io/>, accessed on January 4, 2016) and Eijiro on the Web (<http://www.alc.co.jp/>, accessed on January 4, 2016) are convenient tools. The teacher can demonstrate tips for using them alternatively.
- 22 For an example of think-aloud, Bennett (2007, 179-180) describes a teacher who conducts think-aloud, telling her students, “I'm going to walk you through my thinking on the first part of this by showing you how my brain works when I read—what connections I make, what questions I have, what background knowledge I have.”
- 23 PBS Newshour. “‘World's Best Teacher’ Does Not Believe in Tests and Quizzes,” <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/worlds-best-teacher-believe-tests-quizzes/>, April 29, 2015, accessed on January 2, 2016.