Book-Talk: An Activity to Motivate Learners to Read Autonomously in a Foreign Language

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Abstract

In the last decade, extensive reading (ER) had been incorporated into English as a foreign language (EFL) education in various Japanese institutions. It restored the once broken balance of accuracy and fluency in traditional English education, and assisted reluctant EFL learners to start reading. However, ER required rather longer term for elementary learners to enjoy its benefits and the learners needed an extra encouragement to continue ER for the longer term. Book-talk was such an activity to encourage learners to read voluntarily and to improve their language skills additionally. In a book-talk, several learners sat around a table, introduced the books they had read during the week, and accepted questions and comments from the others in turn. It also fitted well in lessons because 3-minute talks and 2-minute Q&A of six members took only 30 minutes. We will report how the activity motivated elder students, who had three or more years' experience of ER, to continue their reading outside the class, and how it encouraged autonomous ER of adult EFL learners, who were reading English books borrowing from the college library. A combination of few talks and many readings worked well in EFL settings.

Key words: Book-talk. Extensive reading. Encouragement. Longer term. English as a foreign language.

1 ER in Japanese EFL settings

Japanese people learned English for six years or more in school but as a foreign language without using it daily outside their English lessons, and English education in Japan long dedicated to educate students preparing

for entrance examination to colleges, which required grammatical knowledge of English and translation skill of English texts into Japanese but not much communicating skills. Because English was a far distant language grammatically and phonetically from their mother language, and also because they had almost no opportunity to actually use it in life, many lacked the fluency to use the language including receptive skills such as reading and listening even if they had enough vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. The institutional program of the TOEIC showed that 62% of the test-takers belonged to the score zone of beginner or elementary levels (10-490) (IIBC, 2017).

A major reason of Japanese students' lower TOEIC scores was their lower fluency in reading and listening, which prevented them from using their knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary in any language activities. Because Japanese learners did not use English in daily life, they had little experience of actually reading English texts without translation or of listening English narrations with instant comprehension. Their *reading* often meant translating English texts into Japanese ones word by word, and they did not believe it possible that they were able to comprehend English texts without translation. Conversation in English was often disturbed because they hardly comprehended what they were told. When they needed to *speak* in English conversation classes, they simply repeated the known patterns or struggled to translate their idea from Japanese into English on the spot, resulting mostly in uttering a few words but not a sentence. Stephens (2015) had observed the mental struggle of her students when responding to her in English, and speculated that this was because of the preponderance of the *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) method in their formative years of learning English. Lower fluency of typical Japanese EFL learners is caused by their lack of actual reading and

listening experiences. Because translating while reading was a demanding activity that needed concentration to handle two languages simultaneously and consumed a large part of reader's mental resources, it was not easy to relax doing it or enjoy it. Only few Japanese read English books for joy and many books were kept in major public libraries without being read for a long time.

ER employed by some adult EFL learners and educational institutions has been changing the situation gradually after Sakai (2002) proposed to start ER from very easy-to-read picture books according to his three golden rules of ER for EFL learners: dispose dictionaries when you read, skip unknown words, and stop reading the texts you cannot enjoy. Sakai's golden rules encouraged adult learners to transform their reading style from translating every English word into Japanese counter part, to trying to comprehend the English texts for grasping the main idea directory. The rules also helped EFL learners of elementary language skills to start their ER from picture books with short and easy-to-read sentences, so the learners did not need to translate the texts to comprehend the stories.

ER itself was not a new approach then (Day & Bamford, 1998), as it had decades of history among European learners, and graded readers (GR) had been well organized as reading material. Studies in EFL settings showed various benefits of ER, such as higher reading comprehension (Robb & Susser, 1989), improving attitude to reading (Yamashita, 2013), and improving reading fluency (Beglar, Hunt & Kite, 2012). However, the bigger obstacle for Japanese EFL learners was that even the easiest GR were not easy for them to read without English-Japanese translation because of larger linguistic distance of English and Japanese than the ones of English and European languages. Sakai's proposal and the practice of Starting with Simple Stories (SSS) method (Furukawa and et al., 2005)

paved the road to ER for Japanese EFL learners. Japanese practitioners of ER also pointed out the importance of periodical Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) in regular lessons for elementary EFL learners, who did not have the habit to read English books continuously (Takase & Nishizawa, 2010).

ER in public libraries also became a trend in Japan (Nishizawa, 2015). More than 20 public libraries in Tokai region installed special bookshelves of easy-to-read English books for ER, and the number of such libraries was still increasing. Majority users of the books were adult EFL learners who had long graduated from schools and did not have professional need to use English but wished to enjoy reading English novels or using English for various purposes. This trend had a potential to reform lifelong learning of foreign languages in Japan in the long run.

2 How EFL learners were guided to read extensively

Typical books collected in those libraries for adult EFL learners were graded readers (GR) from major English publishers, leveled readers (LR) for English speaking children, and easiest-to-read picture book series such as Oxford Reading Tree (ORT) series or Foundations Reading Library (FRL) series. GR of starter and beginner levels were found to be more important than the ones of intermediate or advanced levels, and ORT or FRL were the indispensable series for most Japanese EFL learners to start their ER. Without reading these easiest-to-read picture books, many EFL learners could not stop their translating habit from school days, and thus could not continue their ER for a long enough time to improve their reading skills.

ORT was the most popular series even for adult EFL learners who had graduated from schools or colleges a long time in the past and had not believed that they could really read English texts without translation. With the help of pictures, very few unknown words, and a whole new world

told by more than 200 books, the EFL learners could transform their reading style gradually from word-for-word translation to direct comprehension of the stories.

When there were not any guidance how to start ER at first, typical adult learners tended to ignore the pictures, and tried to translate the English texts word-for-word into Japanese sentences. Then they usually found a few unknown words, started to consult with a dictionary, and sometimes stacked in the middle of the story wondering what a certain word or expression really meant. It was not easy to enjoy the stories with this traditional "reading" style, so they were required to be guided to focus more on the story instead on the expressions.

In an introductory lesson to ER, for example, we usually asked ER beginners to look at the pictures closely, sometimes by hiding the English texts at the first round, and to try to have a visual image of the story. With this visual image in their mind, they were guided back to the first page, and to read the whole book again by paying more attention on the text this time to understand the story more in detail. After this introduction, many of them understood that the method was quite different from the "reading" they had learned in their old school days, started to read picture books with interest, and tried to avoid English to Japanese translation.

For this transformation of the reading style, a large number of picture books, hopefully sharing the same background such as ORT or FRL, were necessary. We usually recommended elementary EFL learners to read about 100,000 words from 200 to 300 picture books when they started ER. Such a large number of picture books was not feasible for most learners to purchase by themselves, but recommended to be shared as the common assets in public libraries.

When an EFL learner felt it easy to read ORT (stage 8) or FRL (level 4), it was usually the right time for her to start reading GR of starter level along with more picture books, where each of those books told an independent story in a short text of 1,000 words with easy English of YL 0.8. Because of this independence, the reader must redefine the whole world of the story every time without the background knowledge supplied by the previous books in the same series.

For this second stage of ER, short and easy-to-read English texts were indispensable, and beginner and elementary levels of GR were suited for the purpose. We usually recommended EFL learners to read additional 100,000 – 200,000 words from GR of YL0.8 – 1.5. Starting ER from higher readability levels of GR by bypassing these two steps often caused typical failure of adult EFL learners. They could not unlearn their translating habit, tried to tackle with very difficult stories to understand, hardly enjoyed reading, and finally gave up reading any English books. The libraries that have GR but fewer easy-to-read books have the unintentional but large risk of inviting such failures.

In the third stage of ER, text length exceeded 6,000 words. It was longer than the texts read in the first two stages, where text length was from several hundred to 4,000 words, with the majority from 1,000 to 2,000 words per book, and could be read easily in an ER lesson of 45 minutes. Because longer texts read in the third stage took more than an hour to complete, they were likely to be read not in one occasion but in plural separate occasions. Reading a book in separate occasions was naturally achieved in the mother tongue, but an EFL learner had to remember the former stories when he started to read the continuation, which required deeper understanding of the story and thus more difficult to achieve. We usually recommended EFL learners to read a million total

words of texts of YL 3.0 or easier before graduating from this stage, which meant the end of ER beginners.

The third stage was the most difficult stage to overcome (Furukawa et al, 2007), and even the earnest EFL learners took slower average reading pace (40,000 words/month) than the first stage (136,000 words/month) or after reading a million words (134,000 or more words/month). One possible cause of difficulty in the third stage was expressed as "easy-to-read books become rather boring, but interesting books are still difficult to read". Finding favorite series, authors, or genres might be a general suggestion to the learners in this stage, but actual advice for each learner must differ from person to person. The reading history of a veteran learner of similar taste often helped, and thus periodical meetings of EFL learners and exchange of experience and information were found to be valuable.

3 Promoting ER for lifelong learning

ER books were complex mixture of English books from various types, genres, and publishers. At least two groups of books were widely used by EFL learners in Japan. One group was the books for English speaking children including picture books, chapter books, and literature for young adults. There were popular books for English speaking children, famous books and awarded books, and even classical stories for children. They were popular and interesting books for children, but they did not always attract adult readers. They sometimes included expressions common to English speaking children but hard to understand for EFL learners. The other group was graded readers (GR) published for ESL/EFL learners. Their readability was controlled by the vocabulary and grammar restrictions and they sometimes included rather artificial or monotonous expressions, but

the topics such as murder mysteries or romance were selected to attract adult learners.

Because the ER books were so different in readability and genre, users needed some guide to select appropriate books for each of them. Aligning the books, for example, by the readability was one method but rather difficult for a librarian to manage because each must have certain knowledge of ER books to maintain the condition. Alternative method was putting an information sticker, which displayed readability level and text length, on the front or back page of each book to aid the book-selection of the users. Gathering the books in the same group was easier than aligning them by readability.

Collecting ER books might be the first step for libraries but they also had to promote ER books in their second step because ER was rather new and not-well-known approach in Japanese schools, in where not ER but grammar-translation had been and still was the major approach. For most Japanese people from children to senior citizens, “reading” English texts meant word-for-word translation, and even most English teachers did not expect that their students could read English texts without translating them into Japanese sentences.

Introductory lessons were necessary to promote ER books in the library. Two types of guidance, telling how to read and how to select books, were also necessary in the introduction. Monthly circulation of Tahara central library clearly showed that such annual introductory lessons increased the number of checked-out books for the following three months (NIT, Toyota College, 2015). The lessons invited new users to ER books and also activated ER of veteran users. Several libraries hold such lessons several times a year for the promotion.

How to motivate elementary EFL learners for the several years' duration needed for them to get significantly higher scores at standardized tests was another serious issue for an ER program in Japanese settings if it were to be employed as a major educational practice. Furukawa's (2011) students increased their ACE scores after they joined the ER program for three to five years, and Nishizawa, Yoshioka and Fukada's (2010) students needed four years to increase their TOEIC scores significantly, and another group of the students in the same ER program increased their TOEIC scores after they stopped English-to-Japanese translation and had read a million total words (Nishizawa & Yoshioka, 2015). The students who stayed in the ER program longer years from six to seven years scored distinctively higher average scores in TOEIC than the students who stayed in the same ER program only from 1.5 to 3.5 years even if both groups of students had read the same amount of a million total words (Nishizawa, Yoshioka & Ichikawa, 2017). As they could not expect instant effect from ER, they would need an effective encouragement to continue ER for the necessary duration.

Setting up the periodical meetings of library users was a method of encouraging ER users (Nishizawa, 2015). The meetings did not need instructors but the participants talked their experience of reading easy-to-read books and exchanged information related to ER books to each other. In these book-talks, a novice user often found a role model among the veteran readers and followed her reading record as the guide. Veteran readers also enjoyed sharing their reading experience with other users. They were sometimes lightly pushed to start reading new books since they wanted to introduce the books in their next book-talks.

4 Book-talk in English

Book-talk is an oral activity in a small group of students (Nishizawa, Ho, Yoshioka & Ichikawa, 2016). They try to introduce to each other one of the stories from the books they have read in the recent weeks. Because of the topic, all the participants are required to read at least a book beforehand and to be ready to tell their reading experience. Successful book-talk in EFL settings is the opportunity to use the target language (L2) productively without the interference of their mother language (L1), as successful ER in EFL settings avoids translation from the L2 texts into L1.

Book-talk in English at NIT, Toyota college had started as a kind of stimulus for veteran users of the library. After reading more than a million words of English texts in several years, the veteran library users were ready to use their English skills productively without having such opportunities in their daily lives. Starting English book-talk among them was easier than expected possibly because they had already been talking about the books they had read in Japanese at monthly meetings of library users, and the only change was the language used in the talks from Japanese to English. Book-talk was also found to be easier activity than other English conversations maybe because the topic was what they had great interest and could share the joy.

Looking at the apparent success in the book-talks of veteran library users, we also started book-talks in regular English lessons (Table 1). If the activity could encourage veteran users to read continuously, it would also become an effective encouragement for other EFL learners who needed to stay in an ER program for a long time, we thought. We started to include book-talks in regular ER lessons, where the students' English skills were from elementary to intermediate levels.

Table 1 Procedure of Book-talk

Step	Time	Activity
Preparation	5 min.	Participant writes a memo for the talks (optional activity)
Talk	3～5 min. / session	The talker is not interrupted until the time limit
Q & A	2～5 min. / session	The other members ask questions about the talk

One session consists of a three-minute talk of one member and the following Q&As among all the members, typically in three minutes. If a group has three members, one round needs 20 minutes or fewer. Typical EFL learner feels three minutes a long time to speak English sentences continuously at first, but he gradually starts to feel it too short to present a meaningful story. Anyway a talk is interrupted by the limited time, so the students are advised to start talking from conclusion and then to move towards the detail or circumstance for minimizing the damage from the interruption.

In the ER program, book-talk was tried in the lessons of from third to seventh year students in 2013. It was welcomed by the sixth and seventh year students, admitted by many of the fourth and fifth year students, but disliked by most of the third year students. For the third year students, whose TOEIC scores were lower than 450, it was too hard to utter a meaningful sentence in a limited time as a talker, and the listeners were frustrated for the long waiting time. According to the responses of the students in the former year, we adjusted the frequency of the book-talk to

none for the third year students, once in a few months for the fourth and fifth year students, and every week for the sixth and seventh year students in 2014.

A feature of the book-talks was to try to talk without preparation or with as less preparation as possible because preparation meant for many Japanese EFL learners to write translated scripts from Japanese. We wanted the talkers to avoid Japanese-to-English translation at their book-talks, as avoiding translation was a major key to success for ER in EFL settings. Without preparation the talks became messy, but we sacrificed accuracy instead of fluency in our book-talks in a sense.

In a book-talk session, keeping equal session time for each participant had a vital importance for involving users of varied English fluency, because it stopped veteran readers who tended to forget their time limit and tried to keep talking, and because it also allowed novice readers to take their time struggling to pronounce just a few sentences. For that, we needed a timekeeper with a stopwatch to organize the sessions in control. In a book-talk session, a participant talked about the book he had recently read in a limited time, typically from three to five minutes, and answered questions from the other participants or received friendly comments. If a session used six minutes in total, ten participants could talk and answer in turn during an hour.

In regular lessons of 40 students, the students were divided into several groups so that every student had the opportunity to talk at least once in every lesson.

5 Temporary results

Veteran users of the college library were enjoying book-talks. The monthly meetings of library users in 2017 had more than ten regular members who wanted to talk in English. Many of them continued to read new books partly because they wanted to talk about the book in book-talks.

The sixth or seventh year students liked book-talks because they felt more reality than other conversation lessons as a talker. The talking content was more meaningful than just exchanging greetings or patterned sentences but their genuine ideas or unknown information to the listeners. They tended to recognize the limit of translation, and to start selecting easier books for deeper comprehension or searching more interesting books in their ER. Book-talk became a good motivator of ER.

They were reading at least a book for their book-talk at weekly ER lessons, and their anxiety for using English seemed to evaporate on the way. In such a way, book-talks allowed intermediate EFL learners to transform their in-class activity from receptive activity such as reading silently to productive one such as talking with each other without decreasing their amount of reading, because the students had to read books outside the lessons for their book-talks at the next lesson, even if they did not have time to read in the lessons anymore.

However, book-talks by younger students had a smaller impact on the learners. Elementary EFL learners could not compose meaningful talks in the limited time as long as they translated their ideas from Japanese to English on the spot. Book-talks did not promote much out-of-class reading and invaded their reading time in class because they needed to read only short texts out of the lessons for their next talks. Book-talk let them

recognize the fact that they needed to read more to use English fluently. Occasional book-talk might be enough for that purpose. They only seemed to accept the fact that book-talk was a relatively painless transient activity from their ER to conversation in their future.

Since book-talk was confirmed to be a hard task for elementary learners, we have removed book-talk from mandatory work in regular lessons for the third year students, and have set it up as an elective out-of-class activity since the autumn semester of 2015. For this activity, we invited the students who had read more than a million total words of English texts in their ER and were ready to book-talks. Thus conducted book-talk confirmed that the students could enjoy and be benefitted from the activity as their elder students did. As they proceeded into the fourth year in 2016, they still continued to attend the book-talk activity in every Friday evening and started to invite their classmates to join the group. Book-talk is planned to be a main activity in the Student Exchange Program, too.

We also used book-talk in a students' exchange in 2017. The students in two ER programs in Japan and Vietnam did book-talks in groups of mixed students, with three Japanese and three Vietnamese students in each group (Ichikawa & Ho, 2017). The procedure was the same, and the only difference was the diversity of the participants. English was the common language to communicate with each other, and English books they had read were the common topic. These common features paved the road to fresh and meaningful conversations among the students in different cultures. Book-talk made a good introductory activity for the exchange of both groups.

As students' exchange could not be a regular activity, we invited

instead several adult learners, who had rich experience of ER and read English books continuously, into the book-talks in the regular lessons of elder students. The students and adult learners were different in age, experience, and learning history of English but had common interest in reading English books. Book-talk with such different learners became fresh experience for both groups, and it activated heated discussions after each talk. All participants were happy because fluent talkers found earnest listeners and less-fluent talkers found kind atmosphere that accepted their slow talk and did not mind mistakes. Book-talk of mixed groups or divergent participants has two advantages: unexpectedly fresh experience and confidence upon the method, especially the long-term effect of ER.

As a productive activity by language learners, successful book-talk seemed to have the following features:

1) Learners of different reading skill in L2 were able to participate and enjoy the activity because they shared the interest in books written in the language or to the others' reading experiences. Because of the common interest, it also served the opportunity to meet divergent people.
2) Book-talk in L2 was easier than other conversational activities because talkers were able to use pictures and sentences in the books for the support.
3) Book-talk might guide the talkers to fluent speaking in L2 by their avoiding simultaneous translation from the mother language if they could already read the books without translation.
4) Regular book-talks nudged the participants to read beforehand as a material of the next talks.
5) Book-talk guided novice learners to read easier-to-read books with higher comprehension rather than to challenge harder-to-read books

with lower comprehension, thus showing the appropriate readability levels for the leaners.

6 Discussion

The authors asserted that successful book-talks improved participants' speaking fluency because the participants could avoid Japanese-to-English translation when they spoke. However, it is only supported by the participants' subjective remarks and the authors' observations. Further study is needed to confirm it.

The long-term effect of book-talk on ER, especially if book-talks keep motivating lifelong learners of English to read continuously for a long term also needs to be confirmed, as the book-talk practices reported in this article only lasted a few years even if the participants had read extensively for longer years.

Conclusion

Book-talk was introduced as an activity to encourage EFL learners to continue their ER for a long term so they could improve their language skills and enjoy the benefits. In a book-talk session, several learners sat around a table, talk about the books they had read during the week, and accepted questions and comments from the others in turn. It also fitted well in lessons because 3-minute talks and 2-minute Q&A of six members took only 30 minutes.

Book-talk motivated elder students, who had three or more years' experience of ER, to continue their reading outside the class, and veteran users of the college library, who had been reading English books for many years. However, its impact on younger students was limited because elementary EFL learners with less fluency could not compose meaningful

talks in a short time. Book-talk was also used well in exchanges of different cultures and multi-generations. A combination of few talks and many readings worked well in EFL settings.

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