

MATERIALS FOR READING ALOUD BY TEACHERS OF VERY YOUNG JAPANESE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Introduction

This essay focuses on materials for reading aloud by teachers of very young Japanese learners. After referring to the literature and the purpose of my study, I will explain about my participants and materials; i.e., how I prepared and used four types of materials for reading aloud. Then the results, including the pros and cons for using each material, are described. I will conclude this essay by emphasizing the potentiality of student-created materials.

Review of the Literature: Benefits for Reading Aloud by Teachers on Very Young Learners

In addition to the studies on how reading aloud by teachers benefits EFL students in general (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Jacobs & Hannah, in press; Kuan, 1997; Smith, 1997; Yong, Idamban, & Jacobs, 1997), researchers have asserted that reading aloud by teachers is effective in developing very young learners' linguistic proficiencies as well. These proficiencies include lexical knowledge, listening abilities, and reading skills. For example, Heald-Taylor (1986) introduces how Big books can be used for reading aloud activities to promote very young students' lexical knowledge (pp. 37-40). As for listening, Jacobs and Hannah (in press) introduce reading aloud by teacher activities such as the "cartoon version" that can be used to develop young learners' listening skills without expecting them to read or write in L2, and avow that reading aloud by teachers can refine young students' listening skills. Finally as for reading, M. Allan-Tamai (personal communication, January 27, 2004) acknowledges that activities such as reading aloud by teachers are especially beneficial for very young beginners who are not yet able to learn the sound/symbol correspondences through conscious instruction. Also, Raines (1995) introduces a

case study of a shared book reading activity—i.e., reading aloud by teachers with the help of and interaction with the students—in a first grade elementary class and suggests that reading aloud by teachers can be used to teach students how to predict, sample, confirm and integrate written information even before they are able to read on their own (p.25). Similarly, Davidson, Ogle, Ross, Tuhaka, & Moi (1997) explain that, in the New Zealand literacy program, reading aloud by teachers (they use the term “reading to children”) is used as “a first step towards independent reading [and] children learn a lot about the format and conventions of stories even before they learn individual words in print” (p.145). In other words, reading aloud by teachers can prepare young students who can’t read to read on their own.

Statement of Purpose

The reason for conducting this case study is to deal with the difficulties I have been facing when teaching my young students (six-year-olds) and to determine which material to use for reading aloud. The difficulties, which many teachers of very young EFL learners may also face, include: their elusive developmental stages, their flimsy motivation, and their unformed reading ability.

Children’s developmental stages are so complicated, with rapid changes in its progression, that it has been difficult for me to find the right activity that suits their most current stage. For example, one time a girl started to cry in the middle of my class, blaming me for making her sing a song that was “too difficult” (Actually it was I who wanted to sob, realizing what I was getting in exchange for my hours of preparation to make and practice the song). Or my students once demanded not to play the very game they used to have a passion for just few months back, by saying, “I don’t feel like doing this babyish stuff.” Such complicated developmental stages have given me a hard time in arranging classroom activities that will be fully enjoyed by the students, instead of being rejected or mocked. Since children generally enjoy stories being read by adults, reading aloud by teachers, that has also been claimed to benefit their linguistic proficiencies, seemed to be a suitable classroom activity.

Also, the fact that my students lacking instant needs to use the TL outside their classroom has been making it difficult for me to encourage them to keep on studying the language (We have seen students giving up coming to class.). In EFL settings, many adult learners, too, lack immediate opportunities to use the TL. However, while adult learners may maintain their motivation by foreseeing mid or long term goals (e.g. getting promoted at work in the future by raising their TOEIC scores or making friends with native speakers

by learning basic conversational skills), very young EFL learners can have difficulties doing the same since their opportunity to use the language seems to be way far in the future (I won't be able to convince my students to study English by saying, "You are going to need this 20 years later so you must keep up the work" when they are absorbed in games to be played today.). This means that, in order for my very young learners to continue studying English, the lesson itself needs to be an entertaining event, instead of a drudgery to prepare for the future. As I mentioned, since children generally enjoy stories, reading aloud by teachers seemed to be an appropriate activity in making the lesson a pleasurable moment for the students and in keeping them coming to class.

In addition, my young students aren't able to read well, especially in the TL. This limits the type of activity that can be used in class (e.g., I can't ask my students to do sustained silent reading for the purpose of boosting their vocabulary or grammatical knowledge). Any classroom activity that involves letters must be introduced with caution so that it will not confuse the students. Again, reading aloud by teachers seemed to be a suitable activity for such students because it doesn't expect them to be able to read on their own (Davidson, Ogle, Ross, Tuhaka, & Moi, 1997).

In short, struggling with these difficulties, reading aloud by teachers appeared to be a viable activity in making the lesson relevant to and entertaining for my young students. However, the remaining question to be answered—or searched through trial and error—was, "Which material should I use?" This led me to conduct this study; therefore, my research question will be as follows. "Among the four types of materials at my disposal, which material can attract my students?" The study may also benefit other teachers who teach in similar situations in considering what materials to use during reading aloud by teachers.

Method

Participants

My institution is a child language education center that belongs to a private college in Tokyo. Participants are five first grade elementary school students who come from families with fairly high socioeconomic background (e.g., Their parents being a doctor, professor, etc.). All but one student go to a nearby public elementary school that has a pilot program for teaching English. Some students have been studying English once a week since kindergarten while others started recently. With some support—such as gestures and background information—they can understand basic words and sentences. They still can't

read or write most words on their own (except for some words they usually encounter such as “love” or “cat”) but have learned how to read and write alphabets and are starting to identify phonological relationships.

Materials

Due to the nature of the study and the age of the students, the attractiveness of the materials was judged by observations and oral questions asked to students (in a casual form). Also, the usability of the materials was taken into consideration.

English picture books, ready-made Kamishibai, teacher-created Kamishibai, and student-created Kamishibai were used as materials for reading aloud.

**About Kamishibai*

Kamishibai is a Japanese traditional picture sheet book that is designed especially for reading aloud by adults to children (in Japanese). Each story consists of a set of multiple (about 8 to 16) thick picture sheets with a Japanese text on the back (e.g. Appendix 1). The reader reads the text while showing the relevant picture to the audience. There are many kinds of Kamishibai stories—foreign and domestic, classic to modern, fiction and nonfiction.

Procedures

I will explain how four types of materials for reading aloud by the teacher were prepared and used in my class. They are ready-made materials (English picture books), adapted materials (adapted from ready-made Kamishibai), materials developed from scratch (teacher-created Kamishibai), and student-created materials (student-created Kamishibai).

Ready-made materials (English picture books).

Ready-made materials mean picture books or any kind of materials appropriate for reading aloud by teachers available in the market. In Japan, Oxford, Cambridge and some other publisher’s English picture books or children’s books are obtainable in major book stores or through the net. I first used English picture books stocked in my institution. As many parents and teachers would do, I read the words while showing the relevant pictures to the children.

Adapted materials (from ready-made Kamishibai).

I adapted ready-made Kamishibai for my students. After choosing a Kamishibai story at a public library, I would first simplify or alter the story (by taking out some picture sheets or altering their order) and translate it to meet the students' cognitive and linguistic needs. From time to time, I wrote sentences on a large post-it and placed it at the corner of picture sheets for display when I wanted to aim for sound/symbol correspondences (e.g. While showing a picture of a wolf opening his mouth wide, the post-it reads, "I will eat you!"). Since many Kamishibai stories, even after going through the process of simplification, was usually too long for my young students to keep on paying attention to the very end, I split them into two (I used a single story for two lessons, reading the first half during the first lesson and the latter half during the second.). While reading the story, I occasionally asked students to help me read repetitions that I intentionally inserted in the story to encourage their output. During the second lesson, with the help of my students, I would usually review the first half of the story before reading the rest by asking questions such as, "Do you remember what happened to him then?"

Materials developed from scratch (teacher-created Kamishibai).

Hand-made Kamishibai stories were developed from scratch in order to make the material more relevant to the students. I first made a script featuring my students, their acquaintances, or venues which my students are accustomed to (e.g. a story about one of the students meeting a researcher at the University of Tokyo, who gives him a special medicine that makes his dreams come true). Then, I drew pictures and wrote lines for characters to make a Kamishibai out of the script (e.g. Appendix 2). The Kamishibai story was read aloud to students in the same way as the adapted materials.

Student-created materials (student-created Kamishibai).

I asked students to participate in the process of creating Kamishibai so that the materials will be even more relevant to the students. The procedures are as follows.

Drawing pictures

1. I asked students to draw pictures after explaining them the theme (e.g. dogs). Students were able to choose what to draw as long as their pictures were related to the theme (e.g. the owner playing with her dog).
2. I collected the pictures, making copies for each student.

Writing letters

3. I handed out a set of copied pictures to each student (Each student has a copy of all the pictures drawn by students, including her own.).
4. I displayed pictures (original) one by one on the board, asking each drawer what the picture was about. Based on students' replies, I wrote down a short sentence or a word at the bottom space of each picture (e.g., "Sit down!") and asked students to do the same on their set of copied pictures (Every student writes down the same sentence/word. e.g. Appendix 3-a).

Creating stories

5. After writing sentences/words on pictures, I asked students to create a story using the set of copied pictures they have with them. Students sequenced the pictures and wrote down their stories on a sheet of paper in Japanese (e.g. Appendix 3-b). They were told not to show or tell their stories to other students.
6. I collected the sequenced pictures and story sheets. These stories were translated into English.

Reading aloud

7. I read aloud each story, together with the introduction of the creator (which student created the story).

Results

Ready-made Materials (English Picture Books)

Made by professionals, the pictures in the picture books are colorful and pretty; my students were fascinated by them. Using such materials seemed to be a handy way in preparing for lessons since all I needed to do was to make sure I would be able to read the book in an appropriate speed, volume, and tone.

However, I soon noticed the two major drawbacks for using English picture books. Students were occasionally dissatisfied with them, too.

Similar to the arduousness of selecting free voluntary reading materials for lower level students (e.g., Dupuy & McQuillan, 1997), choosing appropriate ready-made materials for my students was not easy since there was a discrepancy between my students' linguistic ability and their cognitive ability. For example, some materials that were linguistically appropriate for them were cognitively too infantile; they would complain that the story was

not fun. Some other materials, on the other hand, that were cognitively appropriate turned out to be linguistically too difficult; my students, unlike adult students who may just belie their puzzlement under an artificial smile, would stop paying attention or demand explanation in Japanese. Obtaining ready-made materials that fulfilled both students' linguistic and cognitive needs simultaneously was difficult.

Another drawback for using English picture books was its cost. Students are eager to listen to new stories every week and the number of appropriate books available in our institution was not enough. I had to go to bookstores to buy picture books on my own, only to learn that each of which costing half of my hourly payment. Buying such books for every lesson was not feasible (Imported English picture books are usually expensive in Japan. On the other hand, Japanese picture books are available, free of charge, at public libraries; however, my experience tells me that, when using these materials for reading aloud (I translate them), students tend to focus on the Japanese text in the book and pay less attention to teacher's reading (which would be perfectly OK if the objective were to learn Japanese).

Adapted Materials (from Ready-made Kamishibai)

Using adapted materials solved the monetary problem, as well as the problem I would have when using Japanese story books, and gave flexibility to the materials. Many libraries in the Tokyo metropolitan area have a large collection of Kamishibai stories which can be checked out free of charge and I no longer had to worry about cost. Also, students weren't distracted by the Japanese characters when reading Kamishibai since, unlike Japanese picture books with texts printed next to their pictures, Kamishibai had their texts printed on the backside of their pictures (Students weren't able to see them.). Moreover, while picture books are already conjoined in order, leaving less room for simplification or modification in their original stories, as I mentioned, I was able to alter the order or take out some picture sheets in a Kamishibai story to simplify or even totally change its original plot. This gave flexibility to the read aloud materials.

However, adapting Kamishibai had its weakness. Despite my efforts to simplify or alter stories, the Kamishibai occasionally failed to meet students' cognitive needs. Many Kamishibai stories required too much knowledge of the world or level of cognitive development for a six-year-old to comprehend. For example, when reading the story of Lincoln, I realized that students weren't able to comprehend what slavery was, nor were able to sympathize the agony of the slaves (They laughed heavily when seeing poor slaves being beaten by their master, saying that the face of one of the slaves looked like an

octopus in a cartoon show). In such cases, students' responses to the materials tended to be negative, making me aware that adapting materials is not an easy process.

Materials Developed from Scratch (Teacher-created Kamishibai)

Students responded positively to hand-made Kamishibai. Being made exclusively for them, the Kamishibai was more relevant to them than ready-made stories (Someone they had known appearing in the story especially excited them.). Students participated actively in class and replied that they liked these Kamishibai.

However, teacher-created Kamishibai also had its drawback. Creating reading aloud materials for every lesson required too much time. Sometimes I had to prepare several hours for an hour lesson; i.e., creating the plot, drawing pictures, thinking lines for characters, determining which parts of the text I will ask for students' repetition, practicing reading, developing pre and post reading activities, etc. This lengthy preparation made me give up using teacher-created Kamishibai on an everyday basis.

Student-Created Materials (Student-created Kamishibai)

Students enjoyed both the process of creating their Kamishibai and the product of it. Even the most reserved student in class seemed proud to see her story being read in front of her classmates. Students were also interested in listening to what their classmates had created and replied that they liked these Kamishibai.

At the same time, student-created materials had usability. I didn't have to worry about spending money for materials. Although I had to do some preparation work, the time I spent for it was reasonable.

In addition to being able to attract students and having usability, student-created materials provided a purpose for communication and inspired students to express their ideas. For example, students were so excited in creating their own stories that after writing it on a piece of paper, they continuously asked me if I wanted to hear their detailed oral explanation. Also, one student showed strong interest in reading aloud her story by herself in front of the class, which was linguistically difficult at the moment.

Conclusions

In this study, all four materials had their strengths and were able to attract students when they satisfied students' cognitive needs. Therefore, the answer to the research question, "Which material can attract my students?" be "All four of them." As a result, the

type of materials I should use will depend on the situation (e.g., how much preparation time I have, how many unread picture books left in the institution, how well the material matches with the students' current linguistic level, etc.).

However, student-created materials, in particular, may have a large potential in teaching my young students since they provide a purpose for language use. Halliwell (1992) argues:

If we accept the role of the imagination in children's lives we can see that it provides another very powerful stimulus for real language use. We need to find ways of building on this factor in the language classroom too. We want to stimulate the children's creative imagination so that they want to use the language to share their ideas. (p.7)

When using student-created materials, my students were, in fact, trying to communicate. Although they haven't been able to do so in English, using the materials may prepare them to do so in the future.

References

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e.g. of a Kamishibai story picture sheet (reduced scale)

⑤



⑥

ゴロタン
「たいへん、たいへん。
おりようりが きえちゃった！」
おどろいた ゴロタンは、おばあちゃんの
いえに とんできました。
ところが、おばあちゃんは にこにこ、
(ちよっとの間)
たのしそうに、いいました。
おばあちゃん
「おいしかった？」
この おりようりの ほん。
おばあちゃんは、みただけで
おいしくて おながが いっぱいになる
ほんを かしてくれました。
ぬく

綱子をかえて

あわて

e.g. of the backside of a Kamishibai picture sheet (Japanese text) (reduced scale)

Appendix 2



Dr. at Todai: "Here. Take this red candy. You can be bigger than anybody in your class."

Shutaro: "Really? Bigger than Masao or Ryojuku, and even Toru?"

Dr.: "You sure can. Now swallow it."

Shutaro: "O.K. Mmm. It's yummy. It has an apple flavor."

Dr.: "You're growing."

Shutaro: "I'm growing!" "Look at my legs!"

Dr.: "Yes."

e.g. of the backside
of a teacher-created
Kamishibai picture sheet
(reduced scale)

