

An Interactive Approach to Bilingual Storytimes: EFL Student Volunteers' Awareness

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Abstract

It is not unusual for a public library to offer bilingual storytimes to small children in Japan. Storytime sessions are frequently presented by librarians or registered volunteer groups at a library. A group led by the author has been also registered as a storytime volunteer group at a city children's library. The group consists of one faculty member, two administrative staff members, and students at a private university in Japan. It has presented bilingual storytimes at the library once a month since 2008, presenting a twenty to thirty-minute program composed of a song, a couple of stories using English picture books or Japanese paper dramas or *kamishibai*, and music or activities related to cross cultural understanding. Occasionally, students from overseas introduce their home country in between two stories during a session. Unfortunately, most of the Japanese libraries have been unable to offer face-to-face storytimes due to the outbreak of COVID-19 since the spring of 2020. Our group has been also asked to suspend its volunteer activities by a city children's library since then. This study aims to explore EFL student volunteers' awareness through bilingual storytimes for small children at the library by analyzing open-ended survey questions as well as the author's observation.

Keywords:

EFL, bilingual storytime, English picture books, interactive approach

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I. Introduction

Japanese public libraries began to offer storytimes to children with the aim of inviting them to the world of books or introducing reading into their life around the mid-1960s (Fujii, 2005). However, the survey shows there were few public libraries accepting volunteers in the year of 1970 and before (National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2010). It is said that Japanese public libraries practically started to accept volunteers in response to *the Lifelong Learning Promotion Law* established in 1990. This law includes promotion of recurrent education and volunteer activities at social educational facilities such as community centers, museums and public libraries. Then *the Law on the Promotion of Reading Activities for Children* was enforced in 2001. This law states that the national and local public entities shall enthusiastically promote environmental arrangements for all children under the age of 18 so that they can voluntarily engage themselves in reading anywhere and anytime. In fact, the issue concerning children's reading has been argued since the 1980s. In particular, it was discussed from the perspective of Japanese language education between the 1980s and 1990s (Iwasaki, 2008). Later, there was what is called a PISA shock. In the 2003 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), Japan's ranking plummeted into 14th place among the 40 participating countries and regions. As for the causes of the decline in schoolchildren's reading comprehension, experts pointed out that children today mainly read and write short sentences because of the spread of smartphones and social media (Mito, 2019). Moreover, the 2018 survey reveals that on average elementary school students nowadays read only a third as many books as those in 1989 (Gakken, 2020). Under such circumstances, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology or MEXT has carried out the plans for *the Promotion of Reading Activities for Children* in phases. The Fourth Plan (2018~2022) comprises promotion of effective approaches to children's reading activities according the developmental stages (MEXT, 2018). Accordingly, many different kinds of children's programs were provided by public libraries across Japan. Unfortunately, most of them have been refraining from face-to-face storytime sessions due to the outbreak of COVID-19 since March, 2020.

Tamagawa Children's Library, which has been closed for reconstruction since the end of March, 2019, is one of the city libraries in Kanazawa, Japan. It was opened in November, 2008, aiming at providing a place for as many children as possible to enjoy reading books; a

place for children and their parents to take part in shared learning and to have experience together through reading; and a place for citizens and groups providing children with reading activities to have a meeting or workshop. The library recruited volunteer groups for storytimes ahead of its opening. It held a meeting with registered volunteers in October, 2008, offering the explanation about the library rules about volunteer activities, storytime tips, and a library tour. I organized a volunteer group on campus and registered it at the library with the following four purposes:

- providing university students with an opportunity to contribute to the society
- providing university students with an opportunity to speak the target language outside classroom
- providing university students with an opportunity to meet people in different generations
- providing university students with an opportunity to share a fun with children through storytime

The group has been presenting bilingual storytimes at the library once a month since November, 2008, and performed 112 storytime sessions as of February, 2020. I am the representative of the group, acting as a liaison with the library. The group policy is to welcome any student who wishes to do the volunteer activities at the library.

II. Literature Review

Why is reading important for children? A wide range of studies have reported that reading has positive effects on children's development. In a study conducted by National Institution for Youth Education, Japanese junior and senior high school students having many reading activities during a period of time from preschool to junior high school tend to be more social and future-oriented, and have higher self-esteem and motivation, logical thinking, etc. (2013). In particular, their sociality, cultural manner and education are closely related to their past experiences such as hearing folk tales from their family member, reading picture books by themselves or enjoying books or picture books read by others during a period of time between preschool and the lower grades at elementary school (National Institution for Youth Education, 2013). Then, do Japanese students reading a lot show good academic performance? In a study conducted by Shizuoka University, the results suggest that students who like reading do not always show good academic performance, while

students with good academic performance are likely to spend reading in a planned manner (2009). In addition, the effects of childhood reading experiences are strongly associated with adulthood consciousness, motivation and activities (Hamada et al., 2016). Namely, childhood reading activities have an influence on your later life. For these reasons, storytimes for preschool children should be paid more attention in order to help them become interested in reading.

Storytime including sharing books, stories, songs and fingerplays with small children is considered to be not only a leisure time but also a precious time to strengthen a caregiver-child relationship. In fact, a survey shows that most Japanese parents having children at elementary school stopped shared book reading around when their children have reached the age of six (Inohara et al., 2017). Their survey also reveals that Japanese parents expect their children's emotional development, learning effectiveness and better parent-child communication through shared book reading. In order to grow and develop physically, emotionally and intellectually, babies and children need a secure emotional relationship with a main caregiver, usually a parent; the secure relationship or what is called 'attachment' with a main caregiver is considered to be very important for healthy early child development, and storytelling is a feasible approach to attachment (Killick & Boffey, 2012).

It is most common among parents, teachers, and librarians to read picture books to children during storytime. Picture books are useful especially for preschool children. Books rich with illustrations and photos offer many benefits to help enhance reading comprehension: providing visual clues to help us discover more about the narrative; showing expressions, unwritten details, setting, and context that help us compare and contrast; providing important background knowledge and offering contextual cues based on what's happening in the story (READING PARTNERS). Picture books are also helpful for small children who are not used to listening to stories as well as storytelling beginners (Matsuoka, 1973). In the case of *Elizabete: Adventures of a Carnivorous Plant* in Japanese translation, presenting illustrations only or presenting narratives while showing illustrations was more helpful for 6 year-old children at kindergarten to recall the story than presenting narratives only (Tamase, 1990). In terms of bibliotherapy, Muranaka (1998) points out that picture books can more easily create what she calls an 'open space' between a reader and a listener (patient) because turning the pages helps them unconsciously synchronize the breathing with each other.

The way of using a picture book depends on purpose and situation. From the standpoint

of therapeutic approaches, shared reading of picture books in bibliotherapy can promote a relaxed atmosphere between a reader and a listener, help a listener become aware of himself/herself who can develop a trust relationship with others or rebuild the relationship with others, and feel his/her empathy through stories, whereas the reader finds out what the patient is seeking in his/her present life through his/her words, mannerism, or shared empathy during and after storytime (Muranaka, 1998). Her approach is quite simple: a reader just reads a picture book to a listener (patient). From the point of view of the development of language and preliteracy skills, the U.S. public libraries have been more actively providing early literacy programs for children than those in any other countries. Referring to the history of library storytimes to support literacy in young children in the United States, it was the mid-1950s when libraries and librarians across the country began to use their skills and resources to actively participate in helping children learn to read (Albright et al., 2009). The American Library Association (n.d.) declares on its website as follows: The American Library Association assists and promotes libraries in helping children and adults develop the skills they need-the ability to read and use computers-understanding that the ability to seek and effectively utilize information resources is essential in a global information society. Storytimes presented by public libraries tend to include a combination of books and book related activities such as songs, crafts, and puppets (MacLean, ADTED 458, 2008). Then, what approach can be more effective for early literacy skills? According to Irwin et al. (2012), to be effective, it is important to decide explicitly what the information is the child should learn, to model the desired activity or skill, and to provide the opportunity for the child to try it out and give feedback. They also mention effective literacy instruction should be systematic and sequential. Strasser et al. (2007) point out reading to children and engaging them in activities that encourage the use of expressive language, phonological awareness, and high-level thinking is critical for the development of the skills and dispositions that are necessary for reading and writing. Interactive book reading intervention and book reading extension activities can promote the development of language and literacy skills in young children (Waski et al., 2001). In the course of storytime, reading the same picture books twice, i.e. at the beginning and at the end and providing games or plays which are related to a topic or theme of the chosen picture book can foster children's utterance both in quantity and quality, their attitude towards books, and physical contact with others (Katagiri et al., 2020).

III. Method

Recruiting volunteer students

At the beginning of each semester, I usually introduce students in my English classes as well as my seminar class to the volunteer activities at the library, and request the administrative staff at the International Exchange Center on campus to distribute fliers to overseas students who seem to be interested in the activities. Some students show an interest in the activities. If no one shows interest, I talk personally to some students who seem to be interested in the activities. Since volunteers meet small children during a bilingual storytime session, I try to ask students who seem to like small children and English. I add that such volunteer activities might be advantageous for job hunting in the future.

Practicing with students

I usually assign a library storytime session to two to four students, who should be good friends or have known each other. Before the appointed day of the storytime at library, I practice with students at least twice. At the first meeting, I demonstrate how to do a bilingual storytime and assign a part to each student after explaining about the library's rules for volunteers. Our storytime consists of three parts: Japanese narration, English narration, and English facilitation. I assign the roles in consideration of students' skills and abilities by looking at their brief demonstration. The first meeting also includes an opening song 'Open Shut Them' and book handling skills: how to hold a book and how to turn the pages. At the second meeting, we have a rehearsal and practice repeatedly the scenes which don't go smoothly. I try to be careful not spend longer than one hour on the meeting with students so that they can feel less burdened on the volunteer activities.

The course of our storytime session at the library

We have a bilingual storytime on the 4th Sunday morning at 11 a.m. Before presenting a storytime session to children, we spend forty to fifty minutes for a final rehearsal at the volunteer room at the library. It is indispensable to make sure everything goes smoothly before each session. Ten minutes before starting a storytime session, we move to a storytime room and set up the room by closing the curtains and bringing chairs we use. Then, we welcome the audience, asking children simple questions in English like 'What's your name?'

and 'How old are you?' Our program usually takes twenty to thirty minutes, comprised of greeting, self-introduction, an opening song, two stories and music or activities related to cross cultural understanding. At the end of each session, we hand storytime flyers to children so that they or their parents can check out the books at the library. Every registered volunteer group is required to inform the library of contents of a session in advance so that the library can make flyers of a session. Every volunteer group is also required to write down the number of participants (children and adults respectively), the content of a session, and some comment in the library journal right after each session.

Participants in our storytime session at the library

Most participants in our storytime are preschool children accompanied by their parent(s) or grandparent. We see babies younger than one year old with their parent(s) and children at lower grades in our storytime. The total number of participants in a session varies widely between five and fifty, depending on the weather, events in the city, holiday season, etc.

An interactive approach to bilingual storytimes

We sing 'Open, Shut Them' as an opening song, doing the actions with the audience. We replace a certain word of the lyrics 'put them on your lap' with other body and facial parts such as head, shoulders, ears, knees, nose, and mouth. First of all, we ask children the questions in English while pointing at a body or facial part. Some children response quickly. Others mimic what their parents whisper. We mainly use English in the course of our storytime session. If English narratives seem to be difficult for children, we add Japanese narratives to each English phrase or sentence to assist children's understanding. Some simple picture books need no Japanese narratives. According to a survey conducted by Bandai (2017), approximately one out of five Japanese children at preschool and elementary school learn English outside school. In fact, English conversation schools targeting small children (0 – 6 years old) are thriving and the number of private kindergarten having English class is increasing (The Yomiuri Shinbun, 2018, Nov. 28). Moreover, Kanazawa City Board of Education promoted early English education more actively. English language activities have been adopted into elementary schools since 1996 and an integrated English curriculum from elementary through junior high school has been introduced since 2004 (City of Kanazawa, n.d.). In addition, English has become a regular subject for the 5th and

6th grades at elementary school across the nation since the 2020 academic year. In consideration of such circumstances, children seem to be more likely to have exposure to English.

Here are picture books we often use for our bilingual storytimes:

- *From Head to Toe* by Eric Carle
- *Pete the Cat I Love My White Shoes* by James Dean & Eric Litwin
- *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* by Simms Taback
- *Himokato-omottara [I Thought It was a String, But in Fact...]* by Taku Furukawa
- *I Want My Hat Back* by Jon Klassen
- *The Happy Day* by Ruth Krauss & Marc Simont
- *David Goes to School* by David Shannon
- *The Story of the Little Mole Who Knew It Was None of His Business* by Werner Holzwarth & Wolf Erlbruch
- *A Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle
- *Mr. Gump's Outing* by John Burningham
- *Go Away, Big Green Monster!* by Ed Emberley
- *Penelope at School* by Ann Gutman & Georg Hallensleben
- *Mottainai Grandma* by Mariko Shinju
- *Silly Willy* by Maryann Cocca-Leffler
- *Everyone Poops* by Taro Gomi
- *Mouse's First Christmas* by Lauren Thompson & Bucket Erdogan
- *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* by Simms Taback
- *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* by Mo Willems
- *Leo the Late Bloomer* by Robert Kraus & Joze Aruego

We often pick up a picture book which has a sense of humor, an inspiring message, relation to a seasonal event, a pattern or repetition, rhythms, or makes children guess what might happen. In addition to that, we keep in mind to choose a picture book in which characters or objects are clearly delineated so that all the participants can appreciate an illustrator's art in a library storytime setting. Furthermore, we try to choose a picture book which has a shorter text rather than a longer one because small children can be easily distracted. That's why we always present two shorter stories instead of one longer story. Moreover, we frequently ask children the following simple questions: What's this? What are these? What's this animal? How many ~? What color is this? Who's this? Where is ~? Such a question can

not only give children an opportunity to verbalize in English but also help them notice key objects in a story. We ask children to repeat a word or phrase after an English narrator or facilitator. We also encourage them to imitate the action as a facilitator does if it is possible. *From Head to Toe* is a good example. When an English narrator asks a question “Can you do it?,” children repeat “I can do it! I can do it!” after a facilitator, imitating an animal as the facilitator does. We use *Himokato-omottara* as a guessing game. We repeatedly ask children a question ‘What’s this?’ by revealing the image little by little. When presenting *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*, we ask children what he made out of something old in the reverse order by showing handcrafted objects appearing in the story at the end. When presenting *Penelope at School* with the pull tabs, we ask children about color questions, hiding the part of the mixed color in the scene when Penelope is painting. When presenting *Mottainai Grandma*, we use a real mandarin peel and crumpled paper. Thus, we interact with children through picture books by using props, laminated photos or realia.

A questionnaire to the student volunteers

After each session, I requested the student volunteers to answer a paper-based questionnaire on the library storytime. I collected 33 responses from 2015 to 2019: 22 Japanese students and 11 overseas students respectively. The Japanese students majored in pharmaceutical sciences, health sciences, and social sciences and humanities. Most of the overseas students came from China, majoring in Japanese language. The other overseas students, who were from Australia, the Netherlands, and China attended one-year Japanese language course at university. The Japanese and Chinese students answered in Japanese and the rest did in English. The questionnaire includes the following closed-ended and open-ended questions:

1. Was it difficult for you to use the picture books or other materials at a bilingual storytime?
2. Did you feel burdened with the practice?
3. Do you want to join the volunteer activities again?
4. What work(s) do you want to choose for a bilingual storytime?
5. What benefits did you get from the volunteer activities at the library?
6. What did you realize through the volunteer activities?

IV. Results

Most of the Japanese students participated in the activities for the first time: 19 out of 22 Japanese students for the first time; one for the second time; one for the third time; one for the fourth time or more. Most of the overseas students also participated in the activities for the first time: 9 out of 11 for the first time; one for the second time; one for the third time. As you see from Table 1, 81.8% of the Japanese students and 90.9% of the overseas students thought it was not difficult to use the picture books or other materials at a bilingual storytime. All the student volunteers felt no burdened with the practice sessions and expressed their willingness to join a storytime at the library again (Table 2 & Table 3). What work(s) they want to choose for a bilingual storytime is shown in Table 4. The four Japanese students cited *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* as a specific example. The three Japanese chose Japanese old tales, so did the three overseas students. One of the Japanese students mentioned *Momotaro* or *Peach Boy* and *Urashima Taro* as examples. Two students from each group picked up a story which enables them to interact with children. Table 5 shows what benefits they gained from the volunteer activities at the library. With regard to the Japanese students, “improving speaking skills in front of people” is placed first, and “understanding how to communicate with small children” is placed second. As to the overseas students, “experiencing Japanese culture,” “having a new experience in Japan” and “having an opportunity to communicate with small children” are placed first. Although Table 6 shows what they realized through the volunteer activities, some comments seem to overlap with those in Table 5.

Table 1. Was it difficult for you to use the picture books or other materials at a bilingual storytime?

	Japanese students (n)	Overseas students (n)
Suitable	81.8% (18)	90.9% (10)
A little difficult	18.1% (4)	9.1% (1)
Very difficult	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)

Table 2. Did you feel burdened with the practice sessions?

	Japanese students (n)	Overseas students (n)
Burden	0% (0)	0% (0)
A little burden	0% (0)	0% (0)
No burden	100% (22)	100% (11)

Table 3. Do you want to join the volunteer activities again?

	Japanese students (n)	Overseas students (n)
Yes	100% (22)	100% (11)
No	0% (0)	0% (0)

Table 4. What work(s) do you want to choose for a bilingual storytime?

Japanese students (n)	Overseas students (n)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Very Hungry Caterpillar</i> (4) • Japanese old tales (3) • stories which are possible to interact with children (2) • stories which are unnecessary to make up what to say (2) • enjoyable stories children love (1) • stories reflecting a sense of season (1) • fairy tales (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • old tales (3) • stories which are possible to interact with children (2) • <i>Grimm Fairy Tales</i> (1) • Miffy books (1) • Australian books (1) • enjoyable stories (1) • stories featuring animals, flowers, camping, etc. (1)

Table 5. What benefits did you get from the volunteer activities at the library?

Japanese students (n)	Overseas students (n)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improving speaking skills in front of people (11) • understanding how to communicate with small children (5) • having fun with children (3) • improving English language (2) • understanding how to do storytime (2) • having an opportunity to cooperate with a friend/overseas student (2) • knowing the importance of non-verbal communication as well (2) • recognizing speaking English is fun (2) • acquiring the ability to express myself (2) • recognizing the differences between English and Japanese (1) • recognizing doing volunteer works is fun (1) • shifting English into Japanese smoothly (1) • recognizing that the way of speaking in front of the audience is different from just talking (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • experiencing Japanese culture (3) • having an opportunity to communicate with small children (3) • having a new experience in Japan (3) • improving English and Japanese (2) • having fun with small children (2) • having an opportunity to communicate with locals (2) • enjoying speaking English (1) • improving communication skills (1) • improving speaking skills in front of people (1) • enjoying singing a Chinese children's song with a friend (1)

Table 6. What did you realize through the volunteer activities?

Japanese students (n)	Overseas students (n)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognizing even small children can respond when talking to them using gestures (1) • willing to do storytime to my future child (1) • having an interest in English books and other languages (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognizing children are more likely to enjoy interactive storytime (1) • children's smile—a good memory (1) • nice to see a Japanese library (1) • learning that Japan's childhood education is excellent (1)

V. Discussion

The results suggest that it was beneficial in various ways for both Japanese and international students to present a bilingual storytime to small children at the library. The benefits they gained through presenting a bilingual storytime to small children was far more than I had expected. In comparison with the Japanese students, the international students were more likely to consider the activities as a beneficial cultural experience. Meeting with locals including small children seems to be a new experience for them. On the other hand, the Japanese students were more likely to consider the activities as an opportunity to improve their speaking skills in front of people. It is good to know some Japanese students recognized the following: the way of speaking in front of the audience is different from just talking; the importance of non-verbal communication as well; even small children can respond when talking to them using gestures. Generally speaking, it is not easy for Japanese students to find an opportunity to speak the target language apart from classroom in the EFL environment. Even some Japanese students who had no confidence in speaking in front of people managed to present a bilingual storytime to children after a couple of practice sessions. But in fact, I could see some students were nervous during the storytime. When conveying a message of books to small children, we adopted an interactive approach by asking simple questions to them and using gestures, which was unfamiliar to some of Japanese and overseas students. In addition, I requested all the students to glance at a text instead of just reading it. I always encouraged them to keep eye contact with the audience, which was a little challenge for some students. It took time and efforts for some Japanese students to get used to a series of interactive dialogs, which is assumed to be attributed to their imbalance between input and output activities. Such an interactive approach requires them to pay more attention to children's response and reaction. Each session can proceed differently depending on the audience, which leads the student volunteers to improve their communication skills both in English and Japanese.

VI. Conclusion

The effects of shared reading in childhood have been studied in a broad range of fields such as neurology, psychology and education, and many researchers and institutions

emphasize the importance of childhood reading. Harvard Graduate School of Education (2016) proposes strategies for parents and educators to encourage children to read in accordance with age. Generally speaking, university students except those aiming at teaching profession or something else are less likely to have an opportunity to present a storytime to small children at library. The findings of this study can contribute to a better understanding of EFL students' awareness through their volunteer experiences of presenting a bilingual storytime to small children at public library. Involving in such an activity even once can help EFL students to understand how to communicate with small children and how to present an interactive storytime to them in English. Although only one student expressed her willingness to do storytime to her future child, such an experience can help the student volunteers to have shared reading with their future children in an interactive way.

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～年度
英語読み聞かせアンケート

北陸大学英語読み聞かせサークルのボランティア活動の向上を目指し、この度アンケートを実施させて戴きます。該当するものに○または記述して下さい。

1. あなたは日本人ですか、留学生ですか？

- a. 日本人 b. 留学生（国名： ）

2. 今回の参加は何回目ですか？

- a. 1回目 b. 2回目 c. 3回目 d. 4回以上

3. 使用した絵本等は読み聞かせをする上であなたにとって難しかったですか？

- a. 丁度よかった b. 少し難しかった c. とても難しかった

4. 練習は負担に感じましたか？

- a. 感じた b. 少し感じた c. 感じなかった

5. また参加してみたいですか？

- a. はい b. いいえ

6. 5で「いいえ」と答えた方、理由をお聞かせ下さい。

例：忙しい

7. 今後、どんな作品の読み聞かせをしてみたいですか？

8. 活動を通して自分自身にとってプラスになったと思う点を挙げて下さい。

9. その他、気がついた点があれば自由にお書き下さい。

ご協力ありがとうございました

