Helping Children Learn To Think in English Through Reading Storybooks

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Introduction

My interest in using storybooks for teaching English began when I was teaching middle-school students in Korea. My search for material which could provide a basis for conversation and writing in my classes led me to try some of the many all-English storybooks available. Later I began using them to teach English to two elementary-school students whom I taught on the telephone. The latter experience has been so successful that it motivated me to write this paper.

The middle-school students had been exposed to a lot of English vocabulary. Nevertheless, when I presented them with a page of English writing with no or very little new vocabulary, I was surprised to find that they seemed to have great difficulty with it. "Teacher, very difficult!" they would say to me. I concluded that they were lacking in ability to process English. Their English training has focused mainly on the level of single words (vocabulary lists) and translation into their native language. Reading selections in their elementary and middle-school texts are short and usually accompanied by native language support. Perhaps this is why the students had not moved to the point where, upon encountering words memorized, they were able to instantly connect them to the mental concepts embodied. Their processing probably was mainly occurring in their native language..

The ability to interconnect various mental constructs without reverting to native-language processing is essential not only to reading comprehension, but to conversation as well. The project described in this paper with the elementary school children convinced me that early introduction of longer selections could be extremely beneficial in EFL training. Rather than waiting until the later grades, extensive reading should be introduced as early as possible, in order to take advantage of the facility with which children under the age of 12 acquire language.

The key to the success of such reading, however, is to keep the number of new words or idiomatic phrases per page down to a maximum of one or two.. This point can't be over-emphasized. The whole idea of such reading is to keep the reader engaged in the story. It requires that the reader be able to get the meaning without stopping often, if at all, to find out the meanings of new words. If new items seriously impede understanding, students get discouraged; and it may turn into another grammar-translation exercise.

Tutoring project using readers

When I began teaching them, Bo-kyung was 8 (Western age), and in 2nd grade; Chang-jun was 9, in 3rd grade. Chang-jun was getting an hour a week of English in regular school, and both had had some other exposure to English from another private teacher. However, neither knew any English to speak of.

From September 2000 through February 2001 each child logged around 60 hours with me. During this period, each child's daily half-hour on the telephone with me was

spent largely in reading texts like *Let's Go* and *Up and Away with English*, with storybooks used for variety. Then from March through September, 2001 each logged another 50 hours. Again, lessons were daily. Thirty of these 50 hours were with me (3 days a week), the other 20 with another teacher (2 days a week). During the latter period I was tutoring them using exclusively readers, while the other teacher worked with them using standard texts. They read a total of 18 books with me during this period. In addition Bo-kyung started to get one hour a week of English in school when she graduated to 3rd grade, and Chang-jun continued to receive the same in 4th grade. We also had two personal visits, in the context of outings with the family.

At first Chang-jun progressed faster than Bo-kyung, but when he was absent for a short period, she caught up with him; and since then the two have been reading the same materials. After the 110 hours of tutoring described, they could easily read and understand the Oxford Classic Tales books at Elementary Level 2, and were beginning on an Elementary Level 3 book. Elementary 2 is listed by Oxford as having a headword[ii][2] count of 300 words, Elementary 3, a count of 400 words.

 When they had zero English vocabulary, they got meaning from pictures and my translations of words into their NL obtained from dictionaries. This was fine at the beginning, but items not literally translatable and/or not findable in dictionaries appeared very soon; and then I turned to NL speakers who could also speak English. Fortunately, the children had already been trained to use a dictionary in English, and we increasingly looked up words in these. We employed English-NL, English-English, and picture dictionaries. I say "we", because I and they each had the same dictionaries. Later I began checking comprehension by having them do the exercises provided in the readers, or by asking them to give me the meaning of a word in Korean. As soon as they began spontaneously speaking to me, I changed the routine and started having them retell me the stories in their own words.

The kind of word or phrase translation I have described above is the only translation that was done. We started out by going through one basic phonics book. They repeated after me. After that, I switched to having them read, whatever book we were using, and that became the basic procedure. They read, and I corrected their pronunciation. When we came to the past tense and future tense, explanations with simple English words were used (yesterday, tomorrow). However, I did use some examples from the little NL I knew to get the time ideas across. Once they got it, I only had to refer to "yesterday" or "tomorrow" to remind them.

A list of what books we used is given below[iii][3]. This sequence is roughly graded in vocabulary, and I provide it only as a possible service to others. I spent hours and hours in bookstores looking at beginning-level readers. Some readers I rejected because I didn't like the story itself. Some seemed too expensive for the amount of reading they provided. Others, especially those of certain publishers, were filled with untranslatable idioms or words which are infrequently used. Of course, there are many other possible combinations, and many other books that I didn't see.[iv][4]

Results

What have Chang-jun and Bo-kyung achieved, really? After around 110 hours of instruction, they are easily reading books that Oxford rates as 300-400 word level. What about the length and complexity of text they can handle? Well, the Oxford Elementary 2 (300 head-words) text has around 70-100 words per page, and 18 pages[v][5] of text. Here are a couple of sentences from one of them: "When the prince saw Cinderella, he thought, "She is the most beautiful girl in the world!" He went to her and said, "Will you dance with me?" "Yes", she said, "I will." (*Cinderella*, Oxford Classic Tales). I think it is fair to say that Chang-jun and Bo-kyung had gained the capacity to process a lot of fairly complex English at this point, and to do it rather easily. I believe that many teachers who use predominantly the grammar-translation method in EFL teaching would be surprised that such young children could understand what these children were reading.

What about results with regard to speaking? Chang-jun and Bo-kyung's willingness and ability to use words mastered in reading at first lagged noticeably behind their comprehension of them in text. From the beginning, lessons began with greetings and a little conversation. Naturally it was difficult at first with no vocabulary at all, and all of us were frustrated at times. For quite a while, they resisted talking, and preferred to get right to reading. But there came a point when they began to really try to actively use their limited 300-400 word vocabulary to get close enough to the meaning they had in mind so I could get it. One of Chang-jun's first such utterances was: "Teacher, up page, left. What is?" (What's that at the top of the page on the left?) Around that time, Bo-Kyung said, "I find book and bring tomorrow." Both spontaneously produced several respectable English sentences rivaling what some of the university freshmen I was teaching at the time could produce after years of English training.

Of course, this little trial run should be replicated with more children and some controls. Perhaps Chang-jun and Bo-kyung are just exceptionally bright children. Perhaps the frequency of classes affects the results, or the motivation provided at home. They may be listening to English on TV. I actually believe the work with me was a primary factor, based on what I know; but before these results with regard to speaking can be taken as anything but promising, the method obviously requires systematic testing.

It can definitely be said, however, that this set of observations shows that a graded series of readers can provide a way for children to rapidly increase their ability to handle English text; and that translation is not needed if the stories are correctly graded.

Current ESL theory and storybooks

If correctly chosen, storybooks would correspond to the "comprehensible input" which ESL theorists say should be emphasized in the communicative classroom.[vi][6] Reading stories or literature can greatly affect one factor known to be critical in learning a language:motivation.[vii][7] When beginning readers can read a "whole book" it is a source of pride and it also shows them that they actually have a use for the language they are learning.

Extensive reading has been advocated as a means of building vocabulary [viii][8] [ix][9] and in ESL training [x][10] [xi][11] Although Seal, 1991,[xii][12] cautions that the idea that ESL learners can effortlessly acquire large amounts of vocabulary through context is "largely untested" , some studies do indicate that reading and listening to stories positively influence learners' vocabulary and comprehension [xiii][13] [xiv][14]. Elley and Mangubhai [xv][15] documented the results of a literature-based reading program in 8 schools in Fiji. They found that after 8 months in the program, the 4th and 5th graders showed progress in reading at twice the usual rate. After 20 months, the gains had not only continued by had spread to other language skills. It is well-documented that what is read is reflected in the syntactic structure and style of what children write; and that it can improve writing more than formal grammar instruction [xvi][16] [xvii][17]

Factors which influence ease of comprehension of a book by a reader go beyond vocabulary, idioms, and syntax (the primary criteria for the books selected here). References to things the reader is unacquainted with (including culturally-specific ones), the presence of figurative language, and switching between narrative and expository style make comprehension more difficult.[xviii][18] [xix][19] Patterned language (repetition) and predictability of structure make it easier for beginning readers.

Discussion and Conclusion
To some people, stories read "just for fun" might seem like a waste of time. However, even in simple step-one stories, the amount of language provides an impressive amount of English practice. Take *Po-po*, for instance (Oxford Start With English Readers). When you look at individual pages, with an average of only around 11 words per page, it seems like very little language. But the 355-word text typed-out would occupy a block about 7 cm long (single-spaced, 12-point type) on a page 17 cm wide. This simple book has 64 head-words, including 11 verbs, 25 nouns (not including proper names), and 7 adjectives and adverbs. The amount of repetition far exceeds what a student would tolerate in a normal class lesson. For example, the word "is" and variants (is not, isn't) occurs 61 times, "look and variants 27 times, "his" 24 times, "it" 19 times, "at" 18 times, "this 8 times, and so on. In other words, the amount of English practice is quite significant; and it is practice that encourages "thinking in English"

In non English-speaking countries, using story books in the classroom could be a way to greatly increase the exposure of children to English during that early critical period before the age of 12, when they acquire language so easily. Storybooks could be used even by teachers with poor English, because they can use the tapes that come with a book.

A big point in favor of storybooks is their vocabulary. Hever[xx][20] reports on a study by M. Ljung at Stockholm University comparing the vocabulary of texts intended for Swedish high schools with the general frequency of words in English (using a corpus compiled at the University of Birmingham). He reports that in the TEFL texts many words are under-represented; and that the under-represented words are, in general, frequently used words. That is, they are common in newspapers, magazines, and TV broadcasts and discussions. Story book dialogue and vocabulary often is very close to

what is used in ordinary conversation. Therefore they are quite relevant to programs wishing to produce students who use English for oral communication.

What about using storybooks in the classroom, especially with large classes? For various reasons, it is impossible in a large class to have each child heard as he or she reads, and to correct individually. I think the solution might be tapes, and choral reading. First, have students repeat line-by-line after a tape. Then, read the whole passage again, out loud. Every few pages have the children do comprehension and review activities that are also fun and interesting. Look for the books that have these activities included – there are some.

Cost could be a consideration. The readers we used are relatively expensive compared to regular texts. Three small beginning books cost more than one textbook of the kind usually used in schools, and would provide only a few hours of reading and talking at most, while the text would last for a semester. It might be feasible, however, for schools to own sets of readers which would be "borrowed" by a teacher for use in a class for a period of time. Many schools in the United States do this. Each copy in the set bears a permanent number. The teacher keeps a record of whom each copy is issued to. The books currently being used could be kept on a shelf in the classroom. Every child would know which is "his/her" book, and get it off of the shelf every day, returning it there before leaving. Every child could have a given number for the duration of the term, and this would eliminate the problem of book-issuing for every new book read by the class. Each child would use the copy with his or her number for every book the class read.

I have provided the list of what I used because it can be challenging and very time-consuming to establish a sequence of graded readings, unless you buy all of one publisher's series. This, of course, suits the publishers, but might not suit the individual or school planning the program. What would really be helpful is to establish standard vocabulary corpora of increasing levels of difficulty, like the ones Oxford has done. There has been one attempt to review and to classify a large number of graded readers according to one scale [xxi][21], although the scale's criteria are not included in the review articles.

All of the English-only graded-series readers I have seen are being produced by publishers in English-speaking countries. There are a several series of readers produced by Korean publishers (reprinted English stories), and they are much cheaper than the foreign-produced textbooks. I'm sure the same is the case in many other countries. However, these series are not usable in the way I have described for beginning readers. There are not enough books of the same level, they are too long, they are not supplemented with pictures, and the introduction of new words and phrases is not gradual. True, notes are provided in Korean on every page for every word or phrase that might cause a problem; but this format isn't desirable because it throws the student back into translation mode.

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