Introducing the Family Reading Project

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Inspired by shared storybook reading components of family literacy programs and the substantial body of empirical research that consistently indicates parent–child shared reading is beneficial for literacy development, the Family Reading Project was initiated in 2016. This project leverages what the program creators consider one of the most underutilized resources available to young Japanese learners of English today: parents. Parents of first graders were presented the opportunity to visit a host school and practice reading English language children's storybooks. Following each session, parents were provided a take-home copy of that session's book, supplemental materials, and a reading journal or log. Parents read storybooks with their child(ren) and tracked their thoughts, progress, challenges, and successes. After theoretical justification for this intervention is provided, the basic structure of the project is introduced. Preliminary successes, challenges, and tips for starting such potentially transformational programs are discussed.

家族リテラシープログラムでの読み聞かせに関わった経験や、親子が読み聞かせの時間を共有することが読み書き能力の発達に有効だという実証的研究をきっかけに、2016年にFamily　Readingプロジェクトを発足させた。このプロジェクトは我々が今日、英語を学ぼうとする日本の年少者が利用できる資源の中で最も活用されていないと思われるもの、すなわち親を活用するものである。小学校一年生の親を対象に、プロジェクトを主催する学校で、英語絵本を読みきかせについて練習をする機会を定期的にもった。親たちは研修会の後、家に貸し出された本や補足教材、日誌を持ち帰る。そして子ども（達）に本を読み聞かせ、感想や進行状況、問題点などを日誌に書き留める。親の介入に理論的な根拠を述べた後、プロジェクトの基本的な仕組みを紹介する。現段階での成果、課題、アレンジの可能性を論じる。

The gradual introduction of English language education into Japan's elementary schools brings with it opportunities to teach English through novel approaches that have not traditionally been employed in the Japanese context. Research on the impact of parent–child shared book reading has tended to focus upon either L1 literacy or L2 literacy in ESL environments. The potential for engaging Japanese parents in the process of facilitating their children's English literacy development remains unexplored. To the best of our knowledge, no studies on parent–child English storybook reading in the Japanese context appear to have been conducted at this time. Given the findings of other studies that reveal positive outcomes of parent–child shared reading, there is a need to conduct face-to-face training sessions in order to facilitate a parental sense of efficacy. The current situation in elementary school English education has prompted us to initiate the Family Reading Project.

Parental Influences on Early Childhood Literacy

Benefits of Parent–Child Book Reading

Researchers seem to agree that parent–child book reading is at the very least not a harmful practice. Bus, van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini's (1995) meta-analysis of 29 parent–child book reading studies found "there are hardly any studies with negative effects, indicating that book reading has a positive effect on outcome measures" (p. 15). The researchers calculated that 1,834 studies with null results would need to be published in order to diminish their findings to statistical insignificance. The studies in this meta-analysis were all from L1 contexts, but there is some evidence from L2 contexts of mothers reading to their children in English with successful outcomes (Dever & Burts, 2002; Shanahan, Mul-

hern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995; Yeo, Ong, & Ng, 2014). In this respect, Dickinson and Tabors (1991) concluded that home and school environments contribute to development of early language and literacy skills that "emerge in a literacy package" (p. 41). This seems to suggest that children whose parents take care to develop their literacy skills are more likely to succeed in becoming literate at an earlier age compared to children who do not receive this form of support from their parent(s) or guardian(s).

Parental Beliefs & Self-Efficacy

Parent reading beliefs and perceived self-efficacy have shown to be predictive of children's measurable reading outcomes and continued reading motivation (Newland et al., 2011; Wu & Honig, 2010; Yeo, Ong, & Ng, 2014). Investigating mothers' beliefs about reading aloud to their young children in a Chinese L1 context, Wu and Honig (2010) found that maternal reading beliefs significantly correlated with family income and maternal education. Even when the variables of family income and maternal education were controlled for, mothers' beliefs about literacy practices still predicted child reading outcomes. Newland et al. (2011) investigated the potential links between parental efficacy, motivation, level and quality of involvement, and children's literacy skills in an English L1 context. The researchers found when mothers felt efficacious they were more likely to attribute some of their child's progress to their contributions and increase their reading frequency with their child. Yeo, Ong, and Ng (2014) found parental feelings of efficaciousness were a significant predictor of children's reading competence in an English as L2 context.

Supporting Quality Parent–Child Shared Reading

Interventions often take the form of providing parents the necessary resources to engage children with texts in a formative manner. Research has consistently shown such practices can dramatically and positively impact child literacy development. As such, many programs have aimed at providing parents with materials, supplementary activities, and strategies to increase richness of shared reading time (Dever & Burts, 2002; Huang, 2013; Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000; Shanahan et al., 1995). Huebner and Payne's (2010) 2-year longitudinal study found brief instruction encouraging parental use of dialogic reading strategies had a lasting impact and that without explicit instruction, most parents did not employ such strategies. Furthermore, English vocabulary gains through dialogic storybook reading have been investigated in Japanese classrooms (Uchiyama, 2011). Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, Japanese parental use of dialogic reading strategies for English storybooks remains unexplored.

Supporting parental efforts to engage their children in richer shared reading often takes the form of face-to-face interventions hosted at elementary schools or kindergartens. Projects EASE (Early Access to Success in Education; Jordan et al., 2000) and FLAME (Family Literacy: *Aprendiendo, Mejorando, Educando*; Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995) are two such programs. Both were conducted in the United States, the former with English as an L1, the latter in an ESL context. Project EASE focused on English literacy development for 248 kindergarteners. Through parent training sessions, school-based parent–child activities, and home-based book-centered activities, the program was aimed at increasing frequency and quality of parent–child book reading and assist parents in actively and effectively engaging in their children's literacy development. Measurements of home literacy through a parental survey and a battery of language and literacy tests were collected at commencement and completion of the intervention. The treatment group showed statistically significant gains compared to the control group on vocabulary knowledge, story comprehension, and story sequencing. There was a strong correlation between level of parent participation and student outcomes ($r = .64$, $p < .001$). Project FLAME was conducted in a predominantly Latino, low socioeconomic status, urban environment in the United States. The results presented by the researchers were entirely qualitative in nature and focused primarily on how to face the practical challenges of implementing a family literacy program.

Face-to-face training sessions are typically complemented by providing parents with take-home materials needed for applying their new skills. The Family Literacy Bag (FLB), a book-centered take-home package designed to promote increased parental involvement in reading and reading-related activities with children, is commonly used for this purpose. Dever and Burts (2002) distributed FLBs to kindergarten teachers ($N = 116$) in four school districts in the United States, three of which were experiencing an increase in their nonnative English-speaking population due to a recent influx of immigrants. Each bag consisted of three children's books, extension activities, and a parent guidebook. Extension activities included open-ended questions designed to facilitate conversation about the text, as well as suggestions for arts and crafts or writing activities meant to extend the theme of the book into nontextual domains. Every student took home one bag for a period of 3 weeks. Families ($N = 2{,}340$) completed bilingual pre- and postreading questionnaires and FLB evaluations. Results indicated that most families read each of the books included in the FLBs, but engaged in the suggested extension activities less frequently. In total, 82% of respondents indicated they enjoyed all the books, 73% read all or some of the books more than once, and 45% reported enjoying all the activities. These results suggested FLBs promoted parental involvement in home literacy activities. The use of such literacy bags in Japan is as yet unexplored.

English in Japan's Public Elementary School Context

In 2002, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT hereinafter) introduced a new time period in the school day called "Period of Integrated Studies" or *sougoutekina gakushuu no jikan* in Japanese. Elementary schools were free to allot as many class hours as they liked towards teaching English language activities. Some school districts strongly promoted international education and English language activities through weekly lessons for all grades. Other school boards could only offer the upper grades two or three lessons a year. MEXT never officially regulated the number of lessons and the content, and this "hands off" approach unintentionally created disparity across the nation. In order to overcome this large imbalance between schools, MEXT decided to make elementary school English activities compulsory for grades five and six. It designed a national curriculum for elementary school English, establishing a minimum national standard that all schools would be required to meet. This policy began in 2008, and though there have been some recent changes over the past few years such as the textbook *Hi friends!* replacing the original textbook *Eigo Note*, the overall implementation is still ongoing.

In 2016, MEXT announced English would become a subject in the public elementary school system in 2020. English will be taught twice a week in grades five and six, and English activities (not a course subject) will be offered once a week to students in the third and fourth grades. This new policy will double the time spent learning English, but two 45-minute lessons each week may not provide enough input for students. Schools alone cannot provide the volume of input necessary for students to develop aural and oral skills, let alone literacy skills. Therefore, something needs to be done to support school programs, teachers, students, and families. This is why we have initiated the Family Reading Project as a means to increase exposure to the English language at home.

Introducing the Family Reading Project (FRP)

Context and Official Goals

The FRP pilot school is progressive and assertive in its pursuit of English language activities. The school, a combined elementary and junior high school in urban Osaka serving around 450 students, is rare in that it was chosen by the city board of education to initiate English activities in the first grade. These activities consisted of around 20 minutes of weekly classroom-based English activities, and three 15-minute English modules (quick games or stories) per week. The school created its own curriculum, and homeroom teachers led these activities with assistant language teachers (ALTs) and junior high school teachers frequently assisting. In addition, the school incorporated a municipally approved phonics program to develop early literacy skills.

The FRP was officially initiated in January 2016 with four main goals:

1. Storybook time at home will involve parents or guardians, introducing children to English at home.
2. By reading the same book many times, repetition and interaction with parents will expose children to many English words and phrases.
3. Repetition and close contact with the book and parent or guardian will help children develop an interest towards English letters, sounds, words, and phrases.
4. Through repetition and interaction, parents or guardians will show improvement in their reading ability (fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, intonation, rhythm).

There are two points worth emphasizing regarding these targets. First, measurable outcomes for children were essentially absent. This was not a mistake but by design. Under the current policy, elementary schools do not test student English proficiency or vocabulary acquisition in any form. The official mandate is to foster student *interest* in the English language. However, interest is difficult to measure as it can mean different things. The second point, however, is that we *were* allowed to measure parents' proficiency inasmuch as it relates to storybook reading and insofar as the parents were amenable to being measured. These goals may be revisited or refined in the future, but for the time being they provide the FRP's foundational underpinning.

Materials

Books

Selection of texts has been contingent upon three primary criteria: texts must be (a) visually appealing, (b) reasonably affordable, and (c) within suspected parental English reading proficiency levels. Visual appeal is largely subjective and was determined by general consensus amongst all three researchers. Affordability was also a concern considering that any book used for the program required a minimum purchase of at least 15 copies. Thus, the texts chosen for the FRP were *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*; *The Little Blue Truck*; *Giraffes Can't Dance*; *It's Okay to Be Different*; *A Color of His Own*; *Pete the Cat*; *No, David!*; *Star, Star, Star*; *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat*; and *The Bear Ate Your Sandwich*. All books were housed in the school's library and were freely available to all students.

Supplementary Materials

The FRP provided two primary forms of supplementary materials: glosses and video recordings of the researchers reading the books. Glosses were made only for the more challenging texts. The level of difficulty of a text and the corresponding need to gloss certain words or phrases were determined by the authors. Video recordings of the researchers reading the books aloud were then uploaded to a password-protected YouTube channel accessible by invitation only.

The FRP in Action

Phase 1: Face-to-Face Training Sessions

The FRP was conducted in 3-week cycles throughout the year, with each cycle consisting of two phases. In the first phase, the instructors and the volunteer parents met face-to-face on a Friday or Saturday afternoon in the school library. We gave a copy of the storybook to each parent then led them through the book by looking at the pictures and thinking about what the story was about without focusing on any language, thus modeling how a child without any English literacy may approach the book. Next, we read through the book together, page-by-page, examining unknown or difficult words and phrases. We then read the book aloud once with the parents just listening, and then again aloud with the parents repeating orally as a group. Finally, we closed the session after addressing any questions about the text.

Phase 2: Take-Home Materials

In the second phase, parents took the book and supplementary materials home. They were also provided a copy of a simple log in which they could keep notes regarding their experiences during the 3 weeks. The last page of the log included four questions asking parents to assess the text and share any overall impressions they had. Books and logs were collected 3 weeks later when the parents had finished and were ready for the next book cycle.

Initial Findings

The parents' logs noted the reading habits of the families and described the joys and troubles families had while reading the storybooks. Most of the parents were working mothers with busy schedules so the frequency and length of sessions varied greatly. Most parents read the books as a bedtime story with sessions ranging from only a few minutes to some lasting over 30 minutes. Some parents reported reading the storybooks daily while other families only three or four times a week. Examining the log entries for each book, we learned some of the earlier challenges the mothers experienced. These can be summarized into three areas: (a) changes in parental outlooks towards reading English storybooks, (b) changes in the children's behavior, and (c) changes in the parents' and families' behaviors. The following is a brief summary of the initial challenges and successes.

Early Challenges

In the first year of this volunteer project, we had no idea how many parents would join the FRP and what their English language ability would be. We initially selected books we thought would be interesting and easy but were quickly proven wrong when it came to difficulty levels. Some of the books turned out to be too long for the parents and children. Thus, in our 2nd year, we selected storybooks that were shorter, but even then there were still difficulties. For example, some storybooks featured animals that were unknown to the parents. Another constant challenge was the use of onomatopoeia to describe sounds such as *zoom*, *boom*, *plunk*, *plop*, *ribbit*, *splash*, and *slurp*. These low-frequency words proved to be difficult for parents to understand and read. In order to overcome these challenges, we provided glosses that parents could review at home before reading with their child. We also made video recordings of the story being read by a native English speaker to assist the parents with pronunciation.

Early Successes

Mothers' Changing Outlooks

When this pilot program began, many parents believed that if they read a story every day, this would lead their children to begin reading English on their own. However, after about the third book, these unrealistic expectations began to change when they realized their children were not learning to read. The FRP goals never included teaching first graders how to read, but we hoped that by interacting with their parents children would be stimulated to develop an interest in English storybooks and the meaning of letters and words printed on the pages. Though it took a few sessions, the parents eventually started to understand that interaction with their children was more effective—and more important—than trying to teach their children to read.

Next, parents slowly began to realize that each book had unique qualities. In the training sessions, we had explicitly shown that the artwork in each book was very different, with some books having simple pictures and others very detailed and intricate artwork. All storybooks use this technique to develop elements of fantasy, suspense, and mystery in order to create unique worlds to help capture the child's imagination. Not only the art-

work, but also the stories themselves had characteristics that the parents did not notice in the beginning. For example, some stories were written in rhyme and were intended to be rhythmic when read. At first, this concept was difficult for parents to grasp because they were so focused on the meaning of each individual word. As a result, they never completely grasped this aspect, even when a native English speaker read the story to them. Another aspect of FRP storybooks that parents began to realize was that each story had a different moral, such as the importance of friendship, the importance of family, and to always try your best and to never give up. In the training sessions, the parents started to see that each book was more than just a simple story, that it had a deeper message, which they could discuss with their children.

The parents also reported that the children's outlook towards the storybooks had changed and they were showing an increased interest towards storybooks in general, whether they were written in English or Japanese. Several mothers expressed joy in the fact that both parent and child had "rediscovered" reading time together. All the parents stated they used to read Japanese storybooks when their child was very young, but had stopped around the time the child entered kindergarten. Now they were reading together again and described developing closer bonds with their children through the FRP.

Transformation in Children's Behavior

The contextual repetition of words in shared storybook reading was an effective way to make new words become familiar and easy to memorize. Repetition is an important quality of storybooks that allows the children to say phrases with the parents and gives the children the feeling they are also reading the storybook. Research has shown that repetition in various reading contexts is important for vocabulary acquisition in young learners (Horst, 2013). Several parents reported in the training sessions and logs how their children were starting to acquire phrases and words from the books and apply them to home situations. Another interesting change reported by one mother was that her child started to borrow other English books from the school library. The school librarian confirmed that no other student had ever signed out an English book before. Though these changes were simple, all the parents were pleased to see their children wanting to learn and use English more often.

Transformation in the Homes

The other changes described in the parental logs occurred at home. All the families who had other children noted how the FRP had grown from reading with one child to reading for the whole family. The involvement of other siblings was not limited to younger children, with two mothers reporting their older children also wanted to participate in shared reading. Another household reported they had even purchased one of the FRP books because their child had enjoyed it so much. At a training session, several mothers discussed the idea of purchasing an English book for their family. Another interesting change reported by two families was that the parents were considering sending their children to English summer camps or homestays in the future, something they had never considered before participating in this reading project.

The initial results noted here are just a summary from the parents' logs and training sessions. Nevertheless, we believe these changes demonstrate the power of shared reading. Introducing English into the home can be a catalyst for transforming peoples' attitudes towards English because it is no longer a language that is just used at school but can also be used at home.

Beginning a Family Reading Project

For teachers in public schools or private language schools, we would like to offer five basic steps for starting a family reading project. These ideas are based on our findings—including the challenges we faced, the mistakes we made, and the successes we had.

1. *Begin with short books and slowly work up to longer books*. Do not use the proficiency of the parents to gauge which books would be good or not because regardless of the parents' English language ability, the children are all young learners of English.
2. *Explore first, read second*. Since you will be using short easy books, focus time on training the parents how to interact with their child using the books. Teach them to go through the pages one at a time exploring the pictures and discuss what is happening on that page and what may happen on the next page. Look at the pictures and talk about things like what words do they know or not know? What words do they want to know? What do they think the story is about? Parents shouldn't just jump in and start reading in the first attempt.
3. *Only read when the child wants to*. Parents shouldn't force their children to read every night. If the child is uninterested or simply doesn't feel like reading, parents should not force them.
4. *Readers don't have to understand everything immediately*. Parents need to reassure their child that it is all right if they don't understand everything in the book. Parents will hopefully be planning to read the books several times over the coming weeks

(remember we gave 3 weeks for each book). After each reading, the child will gain further understanding of the story. Be patient.

5. *Have fun*. We found it took several books before parents started to realize that pushing their children to learn to read was not successful. When parents made reading more enjoyable and fun, the child also started to enjoy reading more and spent more time looking, listening, and talking about the book. This form of interaction proved to be better than forcing the child to read word by word.

By following these five steps, it is possible to create a fun and enjoyable family reading project in your school or community.

Bio Data

Peter Ferguson teaches second language teacher education at Nara University of Education, focusing on elementary and junior high school English. His research interests cover elementary school EFL curriculum and pedagogy, pre- and in-service teacher education, language policy, early literacy, and comparative education. He has assisted MEXT in a number of projects connected with elementary school English and is currently completing his PhD in applied linguistics at Temple University Japan. <ferguson@nara-edu.ac.jp>

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