The Effects of ER and Book Talk on Japanese Junior High School Students' Reading Ability

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Extensive reading (ER) is regarded as an ideal input for L2 acquisition in communicative language teaching (CLT). However, it takes a long time to foster observable language ability only through sustained silent reading (SSR). Also, ER practice that follows the principle of pleasure reading without comprehension questions does not guarantee whether or not the students understand the stories by reading them. This study challenged how to instruct ER so as to enhance students' reading quality and elicit students' reading ability, fostered through SSR in a public junior high school, through book talk (BT) in the sociocultural context. As a consequence of six months of practice, the students' reading ability had started to show a moderate positive correlation with their reading amount. Moreover, individual reflection logs and interviews with target students across levels supported the phenomenon with evidence of teacher and student-scaffoldings.

In the literature on ER, it is known that a tremendous amount of reading is required to foster language proficiency (Nation, 2013; Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2009). In the few studies of SSR targeting junior high school students in Japan (Kanatani, Osada, Kimura, & Minai, 1994: Matsui & Noro, 2010), the effect of SSR on English development remained unclear due to their limited reading amount and quality. Matsui & Noro (2010) reported that SSR helped foster students' positive attitude toward reading and increased reading speed, however, at about the 18,000 words level, it did not aid comprehension. Also, although the reading amount was not clearly stated in the same scale of word counts, Kanatani and his study group (Kanatani, et al., 1994) reported that after eight-months of SSR practice, its effect appeared on reading tests. However, there was a chance that this result was due to the high motivation of their subjects volunteering for ER.

Given that junior high school students cannot read as much and also as well to improve their English proficiency as more experienced learners, how can we prove that they can also benefit from ER for their language development? In order to seek answers to that question, I adapted the sociocultural approach to L2 acquisition and literacy development.

Theoretical Background

The sociocultural framework of cognitive development emphasizes the social bases for individual development. Their claim is that an individual's learning is mediated by others who are more knowledgeable than themselves (e.g., Lantolf, 2000). The mediators use 'speech' to interact with others for L2 development (Ohta, 2014), and some activities such as the Book Club for literacy improvement (Raphael, 2000, p.72).

Although the mediator can be either a teacher or a student, some researchers (Ohta, 2014; Raphael, 2000) emphasized the importance of peer assistance. The discrepancy of their language levels has learners scaffold each other in their Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP). Ohta (2014), when she analyzed various utterances learners produced in her Japanese language class, emphasized this point. She mentioned that all private speech (i.e., talking to one's self for rehearsing) to social speech (i.e., peer interaction) helped a learner develop their Japanese. She especially focused on the role of peer interaction and said that peer interaction takes over the functions of private speech by completing each other's utterances and inserting words when a partner pauses, and it enhances a learner's language development in the ZPD. According to her, given that learners do not have equal abilities, peer setting in a classroom situation provides an optimal opportunity for mutual assistance to fill a gap in proficiency rather than in a teacher-student situation.

The importance of scaffolding is also noted for literacy development. Raphael (2000) emphasized the balance of teacher and student-scaffolding. It is the teacher's role to create the optimal context and provide students with necessary assistance for peer-scaffolding. In his Book Club activities through the delicate balance of teacher and student-scaffoldings, students developed their literacy by text-processing strategies such as predicting, summarizing and sequencing, in a similar way to Ohta's speech observation.

In the case of ER, learners need to connect what is written in a book to themselves in the sociocultural context. Therefore, some interacting activities on books students have read using a target language may work as a catalyst to accelerate both L2 and literacy developments.

Research Questions

As a public junior high school teacher, I had the following concerns regarding ER:

> *RQ1. How do we encourage students at different reading skills and motivational levels to read more and to improve their reading quality?*
>
> *RQ2. How do we foster early learners' reading abilities to a measurable level on tests through ER?*

RQ 1 should be realized with student-driven intrinsic motives through interaction so as to maximize the benefit of pleasure reading. As for RQ 2, an answer could be arrived at if ER is done in a proper way to meet the conditions for RQ 1. However, the time is limited to three years in the public junior high school context. In this research, I created a framework to analyze the socio-cultural context in a classroom where students could exchange information and opinions about books through BT.

Method

Participants

The subjects of this research were 23 third-year students at a public junior high school in a rural area of central Japan. They had had 1.5 years of experience of ER done in SSR prior to this study. Their SSR was all in-class reading, one out of four weekly English lessons. During the ER class, they quietly read books to their own tastes for about 35 minutes. As a consequence, they had read 40,685 words on average, (range: 10,856-134,540) throughout the period, according to their logs. Their reading materials were mostly children's picture books ranged

from *Yomiyasusa Level* (YL) 0.4 through 0.8 selected from approximately 700 graded readers from the Oxford Reading Tree, Foundations Reading Library, Penguin Kids, Building Blocks Library, Pearson English Readers, and other series of children's picture books.

Teaching Context

In order to balance teacher and peer-scaffoldings for ER, I used the Vygotsky Space (Raphael, 2000, p. 73) (see Figure 1). The public-private axis indicates whether an activity occurs in a public or in a private space. The social-individual axis indicates whether a learner is learning the conventions of language for social norms or transforming the conventions for individual purposes. Raphael (2000) stipulated that reading activity occurs in the private spaces (Quadrant 2 & 3) in which learners

transform what they have learned in the public and social space (Quadrant 1), and they never have a chance to notice such a transformation occurs without the public and individual quadrant (Quadrant 4). Therefore, I needed to design the Book Talk (BT) to satisfy the features of Quadrant 4. Moreover, in order to facilitate BT, instructions for conversation strategies were explicitly given in regular English lessons as teacher-scaffolding. In addition, every regular lesson started with "small talk," in which students had an opportunity to practice the strategies whilst talking about a given topic.

Book talk (BT)

BT consisted of the following questions designed for ER by Sato & Takahashi (2017): "What book did you read?" "Who are the main characters?" "What is the main
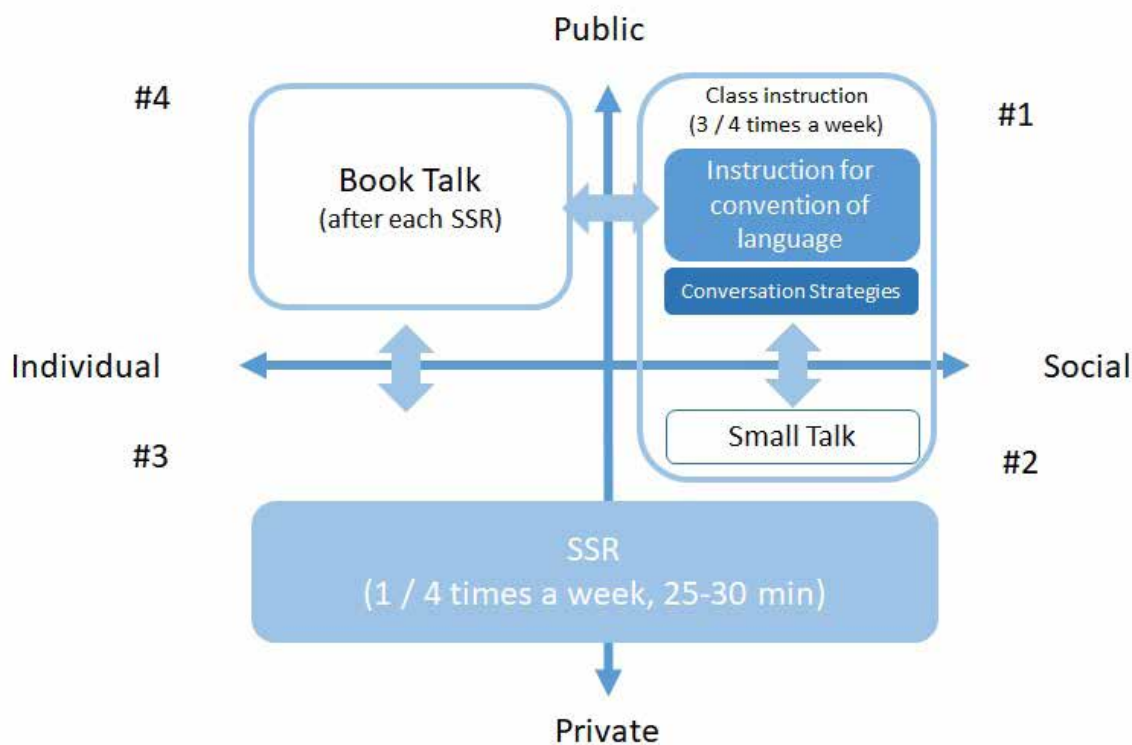

Figure 1. Teacher and peer-scaffolding was planned in the Vygotsky Space.

event of the story?," "Could you show me your favorite page?," "Why do you like that page?," "Do you like the story?," and "Why or why not?" Students carried on conversations asking these questions given prior to BT. During the BT session, students talked to three different peers asking these questions recursively. Their partners were arranged differently each time, so that they had encountered every classmate at least twice by the end of the research. The class encompassed a full variety of proficiency and motivational levels of both English and ER in the public school context in a remote area.

Conversation strategies (CSs)

CSs are considered to be a convention that should be explicitly taught from an early stage of L2 learning for communicative competence development (Savignon, 2002). CSs instructed for BT were focused on the following:

1. Openers (How's it going? How are you doing? Pretty good! Terrific! Great! Okay, All right, Not bad, Not so good, etc.)

2. Closers (Nice talking with you, You, too.)

3. Rejoinders (Uh-huh, Mm-hmm, I see, Oh, yeah? etc.)

4. Fillers (Let me see/think, That's a good/ difficult question, etc.)

5. Shadowing

6. Trouble solvers (What does it mean? What is it in Japanese?)

7. Follow-up questions

Modified from Sato & Takahashi (2017)

These phrases/strategies were instructed in numerical order according to the sequential learnability (Wood, 2010). During the
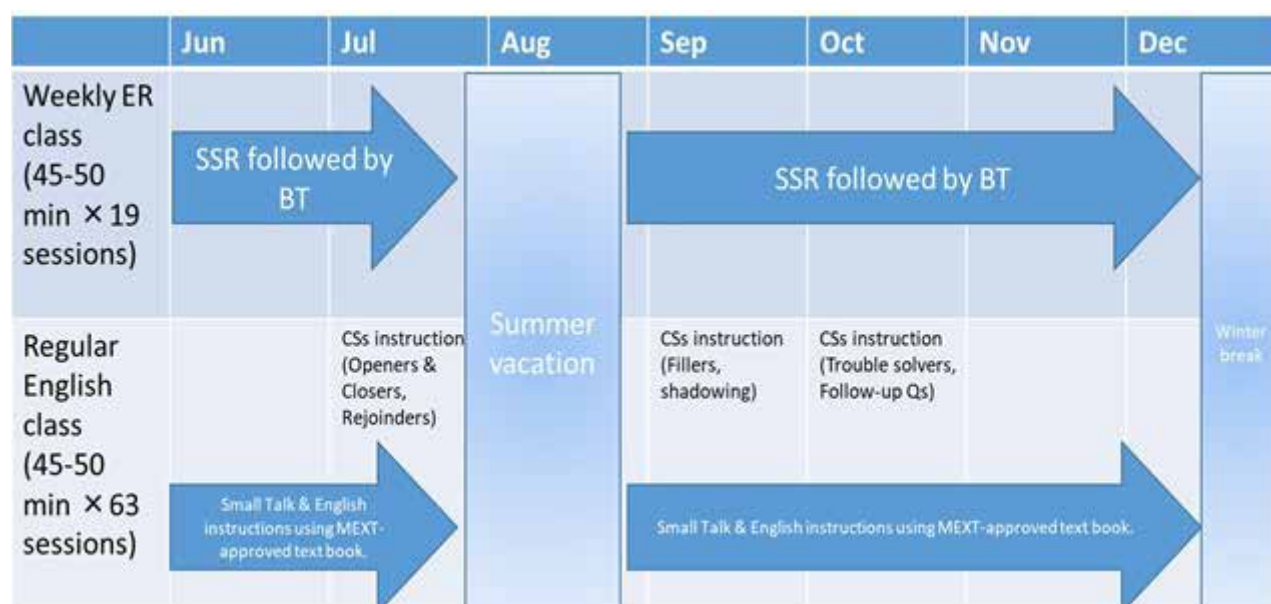

Figure 2. A schedule of ER and regular English classes along with CS instruction during the study.

BT and small talk sessions, students were strongly encouraged to use these CSs to carry on a conversation.

Accuracy of language in students' performance was not emphasized for BT at all, and students were told that the purpose of the activity was to exchange book information to promote ER rather than improving their speaking skills. The teacher's role was not as an instructor but rather as one of the participants or the facilitator in BT, so as not to undermine a student-centered circumstance.

This research was carried out from June 2017 to December 2017. During the research, students had 19 SSR sessions followed by BT. In this study, students continued to carry out in-class SSR with books selected from the collections in the same library as mentioned in the section of *participants*. However, on the contrary to the previous practice, each SSR time was shortened to about 25 minutes due to BT following each SSR session. Figure 2 shows the teaching schedule for ER and regular English classes.

Data Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative data were used for this study. The quantitative data was collected through pre and post-reading tests to measure reading efficiency as well as reading amount and book levels. Reading efficiency was computed by reading speed (words per minute) multiplied by the ratio of correct answers. A reading test had two reading passages and comprehension questions with multiple choices. In order to equate the levels of the pre and post-tests, each test consisted of a set of questions adapted from pre-examined materials in Reading for Speed and Fluency 1 (Nation & Malarcher, 2007) and EIKEN test (a suite of English proficiency tests administered by Eiken Foundation of Japan), Grade 3. To

measure their reading amounts and book levels, student book logs were used. The book logs included the records of word counts, book levels and the content of each book they had read. In addition, the five students in Table 1 were selected by the results of a pre-reading test and a pre-survey on ER motivation, so as to observe the individual development of ER. Their selection was based on possible combinations of genders, levels of reading proficiency and ER motivation, and also their availability in the series of surveys including post-interviews. They were asked to describe their reflection on their talk in the reflection log after each BT session. An additional post-survey, supplementary interview was conducted with them. The reflection logs and interviews (see Appendix for questions) were given in Japanese and later translated into English. The interviews were recorded and transcribed prior to translation.

Table 1: *Target Students with Pseudonyms*

Name	Gender	Reading proficiency	ER motivation level
Ken	M	High	high
Maki	F	High	middle
Ryo	M	Middle	low
Takuya	M	Low	middle
Yui	F	Low	high

Data Analysis

In order to see the development of ER, the reading amounts, the book levels, and the reading efficiencies were compared between pre and post-studies. Regarding

the reading efficiencies, the results of pre and post-reading tests were examined by *t*-test. Moreover, the correlation of the score and the reading amount was calculated on each test. Then, the correlational change between pre and post-tests was observed for the purpose of knowing whether the test results were attributable to ER or to learning effect. In addition, the descriptive data of the target students was examined, to see whether or not student and teacher-scaffoldings functioned to support the quantitative development.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

According to the students' book logs, during the six months of this study, students read 144,287 words in average, which was 78 % of the cumulative total of words they had read since they started ER in 2015 (see Figure 3). As they read more, their book levels were upgraded (Figure 4). At the end of this study, seven students reached *Yomi-yasusa* Level (YL) 1.0 or above.

Students' reading scores significantly improved between pre and post-reading tests according to *t*-test (*$p < .01$) (see Table 2). As for the correlation between the reading efficiency and the reading amount, Pearson's correlation coefficient (*r*) did not show its statistic reliability on its *p*-value on both tests unfortunately ($p = .28$ for pre-test, $p = .84$ for post-test). However, it turned positive in the post-test, whereas that in the pre-test was negative (see Table 2).
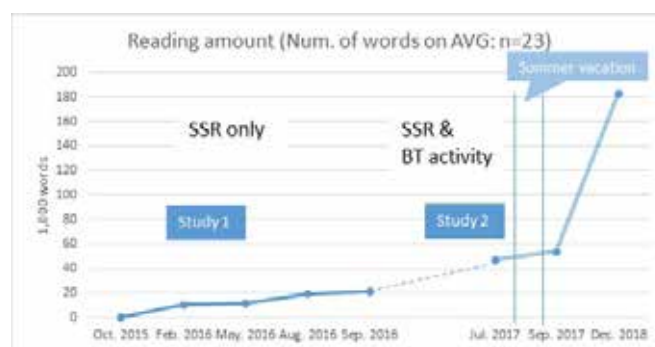

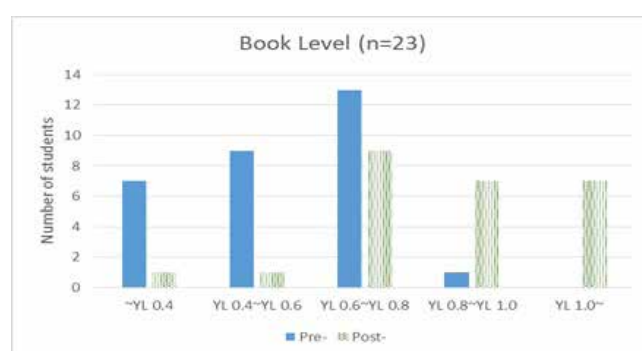*Figure 3*. This shows the shift of reading amount between pre and post-studies.

Figure 4. This shows the difference in book levels between pre and post-studies.

Table 2: *Results of Reading Tests*

	M (SD)	r	95% Cl
Pre	2349.64 (1010.86)	r = -.23	[1936.52, 2762.76]
Post	3668.81 (1561.23)	r = .04	[3030.77, 4306.86]
t	-3.73**		
df	23		

Note. N = 23. *r* = Pearson's correlation coefficient. Cl = confidence interval.

**$p < .01$.

The quantitative data demonstrated positive results of ER on reading amounts, book levels and reading efficiency. Although the drastic increase on reading amount indicated the intervention of BT, it is not clear whether it was attributable to

the natural consequence of the continuum study of SSR or BT. Also, if it was the consequence of BT, we would like to know how it yielded such positive results. Therefore, in the next subsection, I will summarize the target students' voices to examine how they were involved in BT activity, and enhanced their ER motivation and literacy level.

Qualitative Analysis

All the target students had developed both reading amounts and reading efficiency as seen in Table 3. As everyone increased the reading amounts at their level, the development in reading efficiency was significant in lower level students. Ryo, with very low motivation to ER, gained the largest improvement of the five. Yui, who showed symptoms of dyslexia and needed the teacher's assistance in reading, improved her reading efficiency more than one of the high proficiency students, Ken, as did Takuya, a low proficiency student.

BT was, first of all, a good incentive to get these low motivated students involved in literal reading. Ryo mentioned in the post-research interview that BT helped prevent him from reading without understanding which was caused by his laziness:

> *BT had me read more details of a story because otherwise I could not explain the story. Before [BT started], I was reading only shallowly.*

A similar remark was made by Yui, who was a low proficiency student but loved books. Her remarks in the interview showed that BT had her monitor her reading quality:

> *[When BT activity started] I was just looking at the pictures, but now I can understand what is written in English. It made ER more interesting. I can understand a couple of lines without following each word. It's like lines were 'standing out' while reading.*

The ER materials at their level were mostly picture books in which readers do not always have to understand words to follow the plots. Therefore, it was hard for some students like her to know whether or not

Table 3: Development of Target Students

Name/ gender	Proficiency/ motivation	Reading amounts (words)			Reading efficiency		
		pre	post	gain	pre	post	gain
Ken (M)	hi, hi	63,445	221,526	158,081	3018	3276	258
Maki (F)	hi, mid	33,958	121,120	87,162	2420	4234	1814
Ryo (M)	mid, low	26,370	90,381	64,011	1608	6222	4614
Takuya (M)	low, mid	58,256	185,509	127,253	684	1911	1227
Yui (F)	low, hi	54,036	176,521	122,485	536	1441	905

they were actually reading words or only following a sequence of pictures to understand the plot.

As for their speech improvement, students went through the process of language development through struggles. By looking at their reflection logs on each BT, it was around the 6th BT that they found how to express themselves. Takuya noticed how it should be when he talked to Ken. In his reflection log, he mentioned:

> *Ken's pronounciation is cool. I would like to imitate his pronunciation.*

Maki, a high proficiency student, also realized Ken's superior performance and reflected on her 7th BT saying:

> *Ken's explanation was more focused [regarding the events of a story] and clear. So I used his technique when I talked with another partner.*

Yui, who felt great difficulty in expressing herself in English, also wrote:

> *[Through talking with various classmates] I finally got to know how to talk about books. Today I spoke more fluently than ever.*

In their remarks, we can see that encounters with Ken and other advanced peers through BT had them noticing what their speech was supposed to be and try out peers' techniques during another talk. In so doing, even some low proficiency students started monitoring their peers' language development. Takuya reflected on his 13th BT:

[There are many classmates who mispronounced the past form of 'read' as /ri:d/ but] I was glad to know that today's partners pronounced it correctly.

This remark implied that if his partners had mispronounced the word, he might have corrected it.

Through undertaking these tasks with their peers, students' speaking skills had been developed to the level at which they were able to pay attention to conversation content rather than on language skills. Maki mentioned in the post-research interview:

> *Now I like the Foundations Reading Library series very much. I got to know the series through BT. I heard from others that it is a very good series. And when I started reading it, I thought it's very interesting, too.*

Even a low level student, Yui, appreciated that BT opened her eyes to a new genre:

> *I always read fiction, but some people read non-fiction. Through BT I found that there were various kinds of stories. For me BT was a good occasion to collect book information.*

Finally, the reflection logs of Ken, who was the student most admired for his English, presented some interesting insights into how he benefitted from the scaffolding activities despite there being no further advanced students who could help him with his English. Particularly, it was through the CSs instructed by the teacher which assisted his speech development. He noticed the convenience of CSs for talks on the 3rd day and continued expressing his joy each time they worked to carry on his conversation. In the post-research interview, he mentioned:

> *For those who had trouble understanding [what I said], they (CSs) were very helpful. There are CSs called "fillers", aren't there? When I had trouble talking, that was something I could put in. That made sense….*

> *When asking questions, I could help others. I used them (CSs) a lot. They were helpful.*

We could see that the teacher's scaffolding succeeded in assisting Ken's speaking development, and it was mediated by him to scaffold others.

Discussion

These results show that BT successfully had students more involved in ER in the sociocultural context. As for RQ 1, the quantitative data showed that BT worked as a catalyst to motivate many students to read more and improve their reading quality. The qualitative data revealed the process of teacher and peer-scaffoldings that gave students opportunities, first to reflect on their speaking ability, later on their own reading quality, and finally to develop their literacy interests. As for RQ2, the improvement in reading efficiency and coefficient indicated that ER started fostering reading ability as a result of the learning process observed for RQ 1. However, it was not statistically significant.

Conclusions & Limitations

In conclusion, the carefully planned, explicit instructions and facilitation for BT triggered students' self-learning mechanism in their ZPD. However, there are two points that could be issues for future research: (1) it was unclear how much of the reading development was due to SSR, and (2) how BT could assist ER development in the long run. There is a possibility that this reading development was partially due to the synergistic effect with BT working as output. Also, we need to observe the study over a longer time frame, in order to know if the coefficient will continue to increase. Nevertheless, well-planned sociocultural follow-up activities for SSR could function as a good jumpstart for junior high school

students to develop reading ability and literacy interests through ER.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix

These questions were originally asked in Japanese.

A. Questions in the reflection log followed by each SSR session

Kyô book talk-o shite kizuitakoto-o kaite kudasai.

Please describe what you noticed during today's book talk.

B. Questions in the post-interview

1. Book talk-ga donyûsarete kara tadoku-no hon-no yomikata-ni henka-ga ari mashita ka? Moshi attato shitara, donoyô-ni kawari mashita ka?

Have you changed the way you read ER books? If so, how have you changed it?

2. Book talk-de nakama-no yonde iru hon-o shirukoto-ni yori nani-ka shigeki-ga ari mashita ka? Moshi attato shitara, donoyô-na shigeki-de sore-ni yori anata-wa donoyô-ni kawari mashita ka?

Have you ever been stimulated by knowing what others were reading? If so, what kind of stimuli it was and how have you been changed by them?

3. Book talk-de nakama-to eigo-de hanasukoto-ni yori, nani-ka shigeki-ga ari mashita ka? Moshi attato shitara, donoyô-na shigeki-de sore-ni yori anata-wa donoyô-ni kawari mashita ka?

Have you ever been stimulated by talking with others during English book talks? If so, what kind of stimuli it was and how have you been changed by them?

4. Conversation strageties-wa tsukaeruyô-ni narimashita ka? Mata sore-wa book talk-ni yakudachi mashita ka?Moshi sôda-to shitara, donoyô-ni yakudachi mashita ka?

Have you been able to use conversation strategies? Were they useful for book talk? If so, how were they useful?