



Creative and Meaningful Classroom Activities to Foster a Reading Community

KUSANAGI YUKA, KOBAYASHI MEGUMI*, AND
FUKAYA MOTOKO

Tsurumi University, *Seikei University

This paper reports on a workshop conducted at the Fourth Extensive Reading World Congress (ERWC4) on the 4th of August, 2017. The workshop aimed to introduce a discussion format entitled the World Café (WC) as a post-reading activity. We have adopted the WC in our extensive reading (ER) programs and found it to have a positive effect on promoting ER, as it creates a collaborative reading community and helps stimulate students' desire to read. Prior to the WC session, we also introduced a 'read aloud' activity using a postmodernist picture book, *Voices in the Park*, which served as the shared input for the WC session. After experiencing these two activities, the presenters provided a follow-up lecture on the book as well as the results of classroom trials. The workshop concluded with reflection and an open discussion with the workshop participants.

General interest in the ER approach has been increasing in Japan due to its linguistic benefits as well as affective benefits for EFL learners. Despite the positive outcomes, however, the presenters have observed that a number of learners experience difficulty in reading regularly. A possible reason for such failure may be a lack of reading experience in their first language (L1). The number of Japanese students who do not spend any time reading books in L1 has increased, from approximately 35% in 2012 to 53.1% in 2017 (National Federation of University Cooperation Association, 2018). It is necessary to scaffold the students' introduction to the world of reading, to help develop their reading attitudes and habits as independent

readers. To cope with this challenge, we have developed various classroom activities to increase their interests in reading in English as a foreign language (EFL) and to foster a positive classroom community. The World Café discussion is one of the most successful activities we have practiced (Fukaya, 2015; Kusanagi and Fukaya, 2015; Kusanagi, Fukaya, and Kobayashi, 2014). This workshop, therefore, was intended to share our experiences and insights with ER practitioners. The WC discussion is expected to help students approach ER texts effectively through interaction with their peers and their own dialogue. This should make them want to read more.

Educational Goals

As EFL teachers, we aim to help our students improve their English language skills and we believe that ER is one of the most effective ways to achieve that. Reading provides readers with opportunities to encounter

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different cultures and have a simulated experience in someone else's shoes. In addition, we value the nurturing of university students' various competencies such as literacy, cognitive abilities (problem finding and solving, critical and creative thinking, and decision making), social skills (communication, teamwork, and leadership), attitudes (self-efficacy, self-esteem, responsibility, and resilience) and so forth. We believe that interactive activities such as the WC enhance these competencies. University education is also expected to shift from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction for deep, active learning (Matsushita and Center for the Promotion of Excellence in Higher Education, Kyoto University, 2015), which requires learners to engage in and reflect on what they are doing in each activity.

The World Café

The World Café is a type of discussion format developed by Brown, Isaacs, and the World Café Community (2005) in the United States. Given a common theme or a set of questions, participants discuss and record what they utter on a large piece of paper in small groups of four or so. They continue these discussions with other members by forming new groups for three or more sessions. Seven design principles of the WC are recommended (Brown et al., 2005): a) set the context, b) create a hospitable space, c) explore questions that matter, d) encourage everyone's contribution, e) connect diverse perspectives, f) listen together for patterns and insights, and g) share collective discoveries.

As the name suggests, the WC offers a relaxing atmosphere as if the participants are enjoying an intimate conversation at a café. Because of its unique characteristics, the WC enables novice discussion

participants to feel at ease and encourages them to talk more openly. When participants actively talk, they often gain new insights, and come up with individual and collective ideas. Due to a lack of sufficient experience in discussion at the middle school level, Japanese university students often struggle to express their ideas orally in a discussion manner (Kusanagi, 2015). However, thanks to the intimate nature of the WC, we have observed that even reserved learners are able to join a WC discussion more easily. We have received very positive self-reports on their experiences.

In recent years, workshop facilitators in various fields have used the WC as part of a series of workshop activities (Katori and Okawa, 2009). The WC has been used for business, health care, education, environmental protection, social welfare, conflict resolution, sustainable development, and many other fields in different parts of the world (The World Café, 2017). In brief, the WC is a versatile discussion format that can be adapted to suit the different purposes and goals of each organization, and we have adapted the WC format as a post-reading activity to create a positive reading community. The procedure of our WC format is presented below.

Read Aloud and Voices in the Park

Prior to the WC session, we provided an opportunity for participants to read the same book so that they were each able to talk about the common topic. It is crucial to select suitable reading material to ensure students' active engagement. Careful consideration should be paid to the following aspects: appropriation of language level, cognitive level, and length for the target students. Considering all these conditions, we often use a picture book for the WC with EFL learners. In general, picture books are visually appealing, and psychologically

safe and acceptable because they tend to be linguistically simple. In spite of their simplicity, picture books often offer complex metaphorical and philosophical messages, allowing readers to form multiple interpretations. Picture books also assist English as a second language (ESL) learners and EFL learners as they offer exposure to authentic cultural aspects of a target language (Lazar, 2015).

Among the picture books which meet these conditions, we chose a postmodernist text, *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne (2000). This short story describes two pairs of parents and children who visit the same park at the same time. This story is unique in that it is told in multi-voice narratives: all four characters tell their own stories from their own perspectives. Browne successfully expresses hidden visual symbols on every page. Readers may decode the symbols with their own viewpoints.

The World Café Session

Teachers' Roles

In this type of student-centered activity, a teacher is expected to be a) a planner, b) a facilitator, c) an advisor, and d) an information giver or a knowledge provider. With our experiences with Japanese university EFL learners, we have found that teachers need to help students discover something interesting and meaningful in the text, and integrate their skills and knowledge with their discoveries. Teachers need to help learners to enjoy a transaction between a reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1994) and amongst other readers, or to gain input and output through their thoughts and reactions.

Materials

A large piece of paper, a set of different colored markers, and one or two picture books for each group.

Read Aloud and the World Café

The WC (total length of time: 120 min.) was conducted in English as follows:

- Background (10 min.)
 - Reported facilitators' educational contexts.
- Explanation (10 min.)
 - Explained what the WC is, its purposes, and the procedure to be followed.
- Forming the initial groups (5 min.)
 1. Arranged tables as islands. Placed a large piece of paper on each table.
 2. Divided into groups of four. Selected a "host" in each group. Host expected to stay at the table for the entire time. Their first table is their "home."
- Read aloud (15 min.)
 1. Distributed one or two copies of *Voices in the Park* to each table.
 2. Each reader took one character's lines to read aloud.
 3. Read the story again freely to appreciate the illustrations and understand the story.
- Round one (15 min.)
 1. Participants at each table wrote or drew the discussion theme (the title of the text) in the center of the paper.

2. Participants launched the discussion freely in search of the story world. Then, they recorded (wrote or drew) key words or expressions that emerge from the discussion, using colored markers.
- Round two (15 min.)
 1. All the participants except the host left the table and individually moved to any table they wished. The host kept the paper and continued to use it during subsequent discussions.
 2. When a new group was formed, the host gave a brief summary of the previous discussion to the new members. Other members (“travelers”) tried to connect what they talked about in the former group with what they heard from the new host and other members in the new group, and added all new discussions to the paper.
 3. The facilitators walked around the tables to give advice to the participants for active discussion.
 - Round three (10 min.)

Participants followed the same procedure as in the previous round.
 - Round four (10 min.)
 1. Travelers “went home” to their first table.
 2. The host at each table served as a facilitator. In this round, each group shared what was discussed in the previous rounds by observing the record on the piece of paper.
3. Summarized discussions by highlighting key words or phrases in yellow on the paper. By doing this, participants could confirm what emerged from discussion (i.e., collective findings).
- Feedback (10 min.)

Facilitators commented on hidden messages in Voices in the Park.
 - Reflection (10 min.)

Participants presented their reactions with their group members to the whole group for a further discussion on the story or their experience in the WC.
 - Data report (10 min.)

Presenters reported data from their classroom. Note this was done specially for the ERWC4 workshop.
 - Closing

Participants responded to a post-workshop questionnaire. Note this was done specially for the ERWC4 workshop.

Reaction to the WC

This section presents how the WC was perceived by the Japanese EFL students in our previous experiences as well as by the ERWC4 workshop participants.

Japanese EFL Classrooms

The participants included 57 sophomore students (42 male, 15 female) from two ER classes in the Faculty of Law at a private university in Japan. Their average reading level of the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER) Test (Hill, 1992) was Level D (ranging between B and G) at the beginning of the spring semester 2017. This level

is considered as intermediate. The average number of words they read was 203,723 words (104,805 to 534,179 words) by the end of the spring semester.

The WC with *Voices in the Park* was conducted in the 13th week. The discussion was carried in their L1 to express their ideas and feelings freely, and keep their affective filter low. A questionnaire with a Likert scale section and open-ended comment section was given immediately after the WC discussion. The instructions, questions, and answers were written in L1 to avoid any misunderstanding. In addition, the students wrote a short review of the book in English as a post-reading assignment.

As Table 1 shows, the WC discussion was positively perceived by the students. The participants answered these questions in Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The percentage indicates the participants' positive responses 4 and 5 (agree and strongly agree) and the mean shows the average of their responses (the higher the average is, the more positive the answer is). The means are all around 4.5.

The following are typical comments identified in the questionnaire. Students' comments were originally written in Japanese and then translated by the authors.

Writing flow-chart on a big sheet of paper deepened my understanding of the book. As

the chart got bigger, my understanding got deeper. (Student 1)

Writing on the paper promoted connections between ideas. (Student 2)

This activity increased my motivation for reading. (Student 3)

The first two comments demonstrate the effectiveness of writing on the paper. The third comment implies that the WC discussion increased the participants' interest in and motivation for reading books. Overall, these comments support the idea that reading and discussion in the WC increased participants' motivation for reading.

Moreover, the short reviews of the book the students wrote in English after the WC show that the WC discussion promoted their critical and creative thinking through cooperative talking with many others. Some examples of their review comments are quoted below. Their grammatical errors were corrected by the authors for readers' convenience.

We discovered a hidden message in this book. It tells us complicated relationships between the gorillas. (Student 4)

Before the discussion, I thought all the classmates thought like me. But in the discussion, many opinions I hadn't expected came out. After the discussion, I came to

Table 1. Participants' Reaction to the WC Discussion with *Voices in the Park* (n=57)

	Agree	Mean	SD
1) I enjoyed the World Café.	84.1%	4.63	0.666
2) The World Café was beneficial.	82.5%	4.53	0.704
3) The World Café helped me understand the story.	84.1%	4.63	0.717
4) The World Café helped me be aware of pleasure of reading.	77.8%	4.39	0.811



Figure 1. The image of the World Café

realize that it's an easy picture book but many ideas are hidden. (Student 5)

Voices in the Park is a picture book which expresses problems that could happen in today's world. Charles' mother represents people living in high society. She discriminates Smudge's family (including her dog), because they're poor. Therefore, the author describes economic disparity through those two characters. (Student 6)

ERWC4 Workshop

There were approximately 50 participants in the workshop who were mostly university or high school teachers and were from various countries in Asia, the Middle East, North and South America, and Europe. After they participated in the 120 minute workshop, 32 of them kindly returned the questionnaire that was distributed at the end of the workshop. The results of the workshop, therefore, are discussed based on the responses to this questionnaire. The questionnaire items were not identical to the one we distributed to the students as described above.

First, the questionnaire revealed that only two participants out of 32 had heard about or participated in a WC prior to this

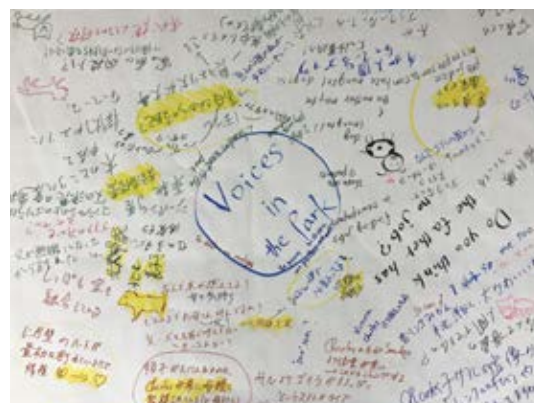


Figure 2. Participants' written/graphic records

workshop and only one participant had experienced its use in class, indicating that many ER practitioners are unaware of the WC, and the workshop provided a unique opportunity to experience this discussion format. Indeed, the questionnaire results indicated that the overwhelming majority of the participants found the WC stimulating and useful. Table 2 shows how the participants felt about the effects of the WC.

As Table 2 shows, most participants found the WC helpful in organizing and expressing their thoughts, and they agreed that the WC deepened their understanding of the story, just like the university students. Above all, the participants agreed that they came to see the story in new, different ways by experiencing the WC. Their written comments also showed their enthusiasm and excitement about the WC and many expressed that they would like to implement the WC in their class.

However, the questionnaire also revealed that writing while talking may not always have a positive effect. Some respondents voiced the concern that they found it difficult to write while talking. Also, many noted that they would like to know more stories that can be used effectively in the WC activity. It is an essential question since,

as we have already discussed, the choice of the story is crucial in implementing the WC successfully.

Conclusion

Concluding this report, we would like to present the benefits and challenges of the WC that we found through our repeated implementation of the WC in our ER programs. The benefits of the WC come from its relaxed environment, talking and writing freely during the discussion and diverse perspectives and interpretations presented in the discussion. The hospitable space provided at the WC enables even the most introverted participants to share their ideas without feeling stressed, and through this interaction, participants can deepen or advance their ideas. Another unique aspect of the WC is the opportunity for interactive writing while talking, which also plays a vital role in effective visualization of thoughts and ideas and sharing with others. Although speech disappears easily, written/graphic records jotted down on the papers give participants tangible clues to connect their own ideas with those of others. Just looking at the papers full of notes, comments, and symbols from multiple perspectives, participants learn the diverse interpretations of a book as well

as gaining an understanding of diversity within the community.

On the other hand, the WC has limitations and challenges to be overcome. First of all, the WC requires a rather specific environment and extensive preparation. The instructors who would like to implement it in their classrooms need at least an hour-long lesson (usually more than an hour) and a certain number of students (the WC is not suitable for a small classroom). The participants should be open-minded and cooperative if they are to enjoy a successful WC discussion. If they have a fear of speaking in English, their L1 can be used in the WC. The highest priority should be given to providing a safe environment where participants feel they can speak up without fear. Discussion or sharing of ideas does not start if the participants remain silent. Finally, the most critical point to be considered is the careful choice of materials for the WC. As Fukaya (2015) argues, diverse interpretations of a book are much more likely to emerge from a story with ambiguous and elusive qualities. The more gaps to be filled and more space to be complemented with the power of imagination in a book, the more talking and interaction can be expected in the WC. If the story has

Table 2. Participants' Reaction to the WC Discussion with Voices in the Park (n=32)

	Agree	Mean	SD
The World Café helped me organize my thoughts.	90.6%	4.38	0.650
The World Café helped me express my thoughts to others.	87.5%	4.38	0.696
The World Café deepened my understanding of the story.	96.9%	4.75	0.500
The World Café helped me see the story in new, different ways.	100 %	4.81	0.390
Writing while talking helped me come up with more ideas.	56.3%	3.81	1.102
Writing while talking made it easier to exchange ideas with others.	59.4%	3.72	1.007
The World Café stimulated me to talk more than in a conventional group discussion.	87.5%	4.38	0.696

no room for different interpretations, the discussion is likely to stop short.

Thus, our next task is to find more stories, including picture books and literary texts that would be appropriate for the WC discussion. By trying different books, we may be able to discover the strengths and weaknesses of this discussion format more closely. Furthermore, although the students as well as the workshop participants enjoyed the WC session, the extent to which the WC has an impact on students' subsequent reading behavior needs to be examined more closely. Still, we believe that the WC provides a valuable opportunity for readers to share their thoughts and gain new insights. We hope that this enjoyable experience will prompt them to read more extensively.

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