

# Questioning the Efficacy of Reading Storybooks to Very Young Japanese EFL Learners: A Vocabulary Study

Luke Winn

*Utsunomiya University*

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This study is concerned with vocabulary acquisition from reading authentic English storybooks to very young Japanese children in an immersion EFL setting. Twenty six children took part in a quasi-experimental study which examined two reading techniques. A multiple readings condition offered three verbatim readings of three different storybooks (nine readings in total), whereas the second condition added brief L2 explanations of target words within a single reading of each book (three readings in total). Prior vocabulary in L2 (English) was also measured to evaluate its effect on word learning. A post-treatment target word vocabulary test was conducted to assess for acquisition. The results of the study show that neither reading condition resulted in significant effects with regard to word learning. The effect of prior vocabulary (both L1 and L2), however, was significant, and implications for educators working with children in this age group are discussed.

本研究は、イメージ型のエフラ環境における、「本物の」英語の童話を使った読み聞かせによる日本人児童の語彙習得に関するものである。26人の児童が実験に参加し、2つの異なるリーディング手法について調査した。一つのグループには、3つの異なる童話を3回ずつ逐語的に繰り返し読み聞かせ(合計9回)、もう一つのグループには、各童話の対象となる単語の簡潔な説明をL2(英語)で行った上で一回ずつ読み聞かせた(合計3回)。さらに、L2(英語)の事前語彙知識を測定し、単語学習効果を検証した。どれくらい習得したか評価するために対象となる単語の事後テストを行った。本研究の結果は、どちらのリーディング手法も単語学習には有意な効果をもたらさなかったことを示している。しかしながら、事前語彙知識(L1とL2の両方)の効果は有意であり、この年齢層の児童と関わる教育者のための示唆を述べる。

**R**eadng authentic storybooks to very young (3- to 6-year-olds) English language learners is a commonplace activity in early-learning classrooms throughout the world, and Japan's growing market of English medium preschools is no exception. Educators recognise their value as they offer richer and more diverse language learning opportunities to otherwise limited syllabuses (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Ghosn, 2002; Linse, 2007). Their use with very young learners of English is seen as constituting part of an acquisition-based methodology, where receptive language acquisition is facilitated through a comprehension support struc-

ture including textual cues (narrative), visual cues (illustrations), and child/reader interactions (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Wright, 2008).

## Definitions

First, in the context of this article, the term 'authentic storybook' refers to an illustrated text that has been written and published primarily for the enjoyment of children with English as their first language. Their distinguishing characteristics are not always immediately apparent to end-users, such as parents or kindergarten teachers. However, such books typically incorporate a rich vocabulary and prioritize an intriguing narrative over learnable linguistic form and content. In contrast, storybooks which are published specifically for EFL learners (children learning English as a foreign language) tend to prioritize comprehensible linguistic form and typically include vocabulary content which is controlled and incrementally introduced over a system of grades. In addition, this paper makes a distinction between three different types of young learners: L1 English learners, who speak English as their first language; L2 English learners, who typically speak English in addition to their first language (e.g., at school); and EFL learners, who typically learn English as a curriculum component and have little further exposure.

## Introduction

### Rationale

Although English lexical knowledge among adult EFL learners has been shown to affect reading comprehension (Laufer, 1992; Nation, 1990), speaking proficiency (Hilton, 2008) and listening comprehension (Bonk, 2000), research on educational practices which support L2 lexical development in younger learners is scant. Therefore, the present study attempts to address this issue by investigating factors that affect pre-school EFL learners' receptive vocabulary acquisition from listening to English storybooks. A small number of publications are

available which offer practical guidance on the use of authentic storybooks with EFL learners (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Wright, 2008). However, little of the guidance contained in these publications has been underpinned by empirical research and many questions concerning the efficacy of using this type of literature with pre-school EFL learners have yet to be adequately addressed. However, a large amount of research has been conducted on the vocabulary outcomes of reading storybooks to English L1 and L2 children, and it is this body of literature which provides a conceptual and methodological focus for the study reported here.

### The Learner

A key question in this study relates to the individual learner. Specifically, the extent to which prior English vocabulary knowledge affects the ability of pre-school EFL learners to acquire new English words from listening to storybooks. Studies of English L1 children listening to storybooks have shown that prior vocabulary knowledge is indeed a key predictor for word learning (Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Reese & Cox, 1999; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Senechal, Thomas & Monker, 1995). Similar results have also been found with a sample of young L2 English learners (Collins, 2010). Thus, it is expected that children with larger vocabularies in both of these groups will learn substantially more new words during a read-aloud session. In response to this discovery, researchers of both L1 and L2 English learners have investigated the effects of different supportive techniques during read aloud sessions, examining whether they can help children with less English word knowledge develop their receptive vocabularies prior to beginning the process of learning how to read independently.

### Supportive Read-Aloud Techniques

In an attempt to help children with relatively smaller vocabularies overcome this hurdle to incidental word learning, researchers in L1 literacy studies have investigated the effects of supportive read-aloud techniques. Studies of interactive strategies whereby children are encouraged to engage in narrative negotiation throughout a storybook reading have reported impressive vocabulary gains (Brabham & Lynch-Brown, 2002; Whitehurst et al., 1988; Wasik & Bond, 2001; Wasik, Bond & Hindman, 2006; Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Price, Kleeck & Huberty, 2009). Other approaches have focused on providing children with rich explanations of target words throughout reading sessions (Elley, 1989; Brett, Rothlein & Hurley, 1996; Penno, Wilkinson & Moore, 2002;

Collins, 2010), as well as multiple readings (Senechal, 1997). All of these studies of instructive techniques report higher levels of receptive word-learning among participants in experimental groups. However, with the notable exception of Elley's study (1989), none of these instructive techniques have managed to negate the effect of individual prior vocabulary and help learners with smaller English vocabularies catch up with their higher vocabulary peers. Regardless of the support given during a read aloud session, those with lower levels of vocabulary knowledge consistently learn fewer new words.

### Research Questions

At present, there are just two relevant EFL studies (Uchiyama, 2011; Tarakcioglu & Tuncarslan, 2014) which have investigated the language learning efficacy of using authentic storybooks with young learners. Uchiyama's study, with a sample of elementary school children, compared the technique of dramatic enactment with verbatim reading and found that the use of this technique resulted in small vocabulary gains. However, the 2014 study merely incorporated storybooks as part of a broader syllabus of learning for pre-schoolers, and little detail is specified regarding the input techniques that were used. Unfortunately, neither of these studies assessed the prior English vocabulary knowledge of the children involved, which seems to be a critical issue when considering the outcomes of the L1 English storybook studies mentioned above.

The main focus of the study reported here is on the question of whether prior English vocabulary knowledge affects very young EFL learners' acquisition of new English words when listening to readings of storybooks. Two experimental conditions were also assessed: one group was given immediate explanations of target words throughout one reading of each story, while the other group listened to three verbatim readings of the same book. These two conditions represent two common techniques which are often seen among kindergarten teachers during read-aloud sessions; i.e., rereading books which children enjoy, and explaining language aspects that are deemed beyond the comprehension of their learners. If the ability of both L1 and L2 English children to learn new words from storybooks is affected by their prior lexical knowledge, it is hypothesized that this effect would be consistent among EFL learners whose prior vocabularies are typically much smaller. The objectives of this research are stated in the following questions:

1. Can very young EFL learners learn new words from listening to authentic storybooks in English?

2. Does the use of either *target word explanations* or *multiple readings* of a storybook help close the word learning gap between those learners with bigger and smaller prior vocabularies?
3. Does prior English vocabulary knowledge affect the ability of preschool EFL learners to acquire new words from listening to English storybooks?

## Method

### Participants

The study sample comprised a total of 26 L1 Japanese children (12 male and 14 female) with typical developmental status. The participants had received a total of two years and seven months of daily exposure to English from a native speaking kindergarten teacher. The kindergarten setting provided the children with five hours of daily care, of which typically 90 minutes would be spent on structured foundation learning activities (e.g., crafts, music, dance, etc.) that involved interaction in English. The mean age of the children at the start of the reading procedure was 6.0 years, with a range from 5.5 to 6.5 years of age. All participating children were familiar with English storybooks as a quick survey of teaching routines at the kindergarten found that, on average, they experienced storybook read-aloud sessions in English at least once daily.

### Materials and Measures

Three commercially available picture storybooks were selected for this study according to two criteria: (1) a meaningful narrative targeted primarily at L1 English speaking preschool children (i.e., not phonics readers or word builders that tend to neglect storyline), and (2) a plentiful vocabulary likely to be unfamiliar to the participants. The following publications were used:

- Book 1 – *Sheep in a Jeep* (Nancy E. Shaw, 1986)
- Book 2 – *Rosie's Walk* (Pat Hutchins, 1968)
- Book 3 – *Tough Boris* (Mem Fox, 1994)

Possible target words, which were considered by the teacher/researcher to be unfamiliar to the participants, were identified from within the original texts and their unfamiliarity was verified by conducting a post-treatment Target Vocabulary Test (TVT, see description below) with a comparable group of children from another class (same length of time on the programme; same average age). Any words which were found to be familiar to this peer group, i.e., where children scored significantly above the level of chance, were dropped from the post-test analysis.

The potential learnability of the chosen target words was also taken into consideration. Research

with elementary school EFL learners in Japan (Rausch, 2011) alludes to the ambiguity between illustrations used in storybooks and the language of the story itself. Illustrations in storybooks do not always provide a reliable context for word learning; in fact, they can often obscure children's understanding of storybook narrative (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Therefore, prior work (Elley, 1989) on correlations between text/illustration-based variables and word learnability provide a solid research basis from which to evaluate target words. Fourteen words across the three storybooks were selected for post-treatment analysis; however, after piloting the TVT with a comparable group of children, one word was dropped from the set due to it being correctly identified above the level of chance.

Two measures were used to assess initial lexical knowledge in both L1 and L2, as well as target vocabulary acquisition:

- *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test – Revised* (PPVT-R) (Dunn & Dunn, 2007)
- Post-treatment target vocabulary test (TVT).

The PPVT-R (Dunn & Dunn, 2007) is a norm-referenced, multiple-choice instrument for measuring English receptive vocabulary, and has been used in similar previous studies (Collins, 2010; Ewers & Brownson, 1999; Robbins & Ehri, 1994; Senechal et al., 1995; Senechal, 1997; Silverman & Crandell, 2010). Using PPVT-R data ensured that English lexical knowledge between groups was balanced, and allowed for correlational analysis after the post-treatment test was administered. The TVT was a purpose-designed, hand-made testing instrument, which followed very closely the format of the PPVT-R test and the descriptions of instruments used in previous studies to measure target vocabulary acquisition through storybook reading (Collins, 2010; Senechal & Cornell, 1993). On each page children were presented with four pictures; one of which corresponded to the target word, along with three distractors. The target word was uttered verbally and the child was asked to point to the correct illustration.

### Procedure

First, participants underwent PPVT-R testing to establish baseline vocabulary scores, then they were matched in pairs before being assigned to either group A (multiple readings; i.e., three verbatim readings at an average reading speed) or group B (explanations; i.e., a single reading at an average reading speed with verbalized target word explanations). This arrangement ensured that baseline English vocabulary means were balanced between conditions

( $A = m = 47.3$ ; condition  $B = m = 47.3$ ), thus allowing for a balanced post-treatment analysis of TVT scores between treatment conditions. Group A was read to three times within the space of one week, and brief explanations were given to the children in group B at the end of each sentence containing a target word. Overall exposure to each target word was balanced across groups as the target word explanations in group B also repeated each keyword two more times (see Appendix A for an example explanation). After administration of the TVT, which took place one week following the end of the reading sessions, participants were grouped into either high or low PPVT-R scores (above or below the median of 46) and their comparative TVT means were assessed.

## Results and Discussion

A preliminary analysis of means found no gender effect on the dependent variable (TVT score). The means for both reading conditions on the TVT were compared against the mean level of chance. Therefore, the mean chance outcome for a multiple-choice test consisting of thirteen items with four illustrations on each page (one key and three distractors) would be 3.25 words answered correctly (25%). Looking at the *multiple readings* group in Table 1, we see an overall mean of 4.85 words correctly answered, which represents an outcome of 37.3%,

or 12.3% above the level of chance.

The *explanations* group, with an overall mean of 5.23 words, answered 40.3% correctly, which represents a gain of 15.3% compared to chance. These figures suggest that moderate vocabulary acquisition was taking place throughout the reading sessions.

Regarding the second research question, an independent t-test was conducted to compare the TVT means of both the multiple exposures group and the explanations group. On average, the group who received embedded explanations throughout the reading sessions scored only slightly higher ( $M = 5.23$ ,  $SD = 2.17$ ) than the group who received multiple exposures to the storybooks ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 2.54$ ). This difference,  $-.38$ ,  $BCa$  95% CI  $[-1.505, 2.109]$ , was not significant,  $t(24) = .415$ ,  $p = .682$ ; from this a low effect size was calculated: Cohen's  $d = 0.15$ . Based on this analysis, there was no difference found in the effects of the two input techniques.

Finally, in order to explore question three, correlational analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between the PPVT-R and TVT scores. First, a significant correlation was found between the PPVT-R and the TVT;  $r(24) = .504$   $[.165, .759]$ , which demonstrates that there is a positive relationship between prior English vocabulary knowledge and young EFL learners' ability to learn new English

Table 1

Correct Answers on the TVT for Both Conditions

Target Vocabulary	A (Multiple Readings) $n = 13$		B (Explanations) $n = 13$	
	Correct Answers	%	Correct Answers	%
<i>greedy</i>	7	53.8	4	30.8
<i>massive</i>	8	61.5	4	30.8
<i>fearless</i>	6	46.2	9	69.2
<i>scruffy</i>	6	46.2	1	7.7
<i>mill</i>	4	30.8	6	46.2
<i>hive</i>	7	53.8	9	69.2
<i>haystack</i>	4	30.8	4	30.8
<i>cheer</i>	3	23.1	6	46.2
<i>yelp</i>	6	46.2	11	84.6
<i>weep</i>	2	15.4	3	23.1
<i>tug</i>	4	30.8	5	38.5
<i>shove</i>	3	23.1	4	30.8
<i>leap</i>	2	15.4	2	15.4
Means	4.85	37.3	5.23	40.3

Note. Maximum score on the TVT was 13.

words from listening to storybooks. Looking at Table 2, we can also see that when the participants are grouped into either a high or low PPVT-R score (above or below the median of 46), their comparative TVT means are substantially different.

**Table 2**

*Showing TVT Means for Both High and Low PPVT-R Groups*

High or low vocab based on $m = 47.4$	$n$	Mean on TVT	SD
Low	15	4.00	1.506
High	11	6.08	2.724
Total / avg.	26	5.04	2.323

These results seem to indicate that L2 vocabulary acquisition from listening to storybooks was taking place at a modest rate, as expected. However, the results in Table 2 also indicate that much of this modest gain was made by those children with a higher level of prior vocabulary knowledge. It was anticipated that participants with larger vocabularies would demonstrate more robust learning through the TVT, and as vocabulary levels measured by the PPVT-R (Dunn & Dunn, 2007) correlate with the results from the TVT, there is evidence here to support this. In the present study, children with larger vocabularies were more successful across both conditions. This result is consistent with similar L1 studies where supportive reading techniques were unable to narrow the learning gap between children with larger/smaller English vocabularies.

### Limitations and Conclusion

This study comprised a small sample of children, divided into two treatment groups without a verbatim reading condition or any measure of long-term retention. Future investigations in this area of research would benefit from the inclusion of verbatim reading to more rigorously assess the impact of supportive reading techniques. Furthermore, a longitudinal research design would allow richer insight into the relationship between frequency of exposure, vocabulary acquisition, and retention.

Educators working with young EFL learners can draw implications from this study in relation to the value of learning activities which assume incidental vocabulary acquisition from rich input. It seems that, even when storybooks offer a low level of linguistic demand, their effect on the acquisition of new words is largely dependent upon the size of learners' L2 vocabularies. Learners with smaller L2 English vo-

cabularies may struggle to isolate words and ascribe meanings in the midst of rich input; therefore, such learners may benefit more from input techniques which present unfamiliar words more explicitly.

This is not to say that real storybooks don't have educational value in the EFL classroom. Any educator of pre-school learners will attest that storybooks possess a magical ability to keep children's attention, as young children are naturally drawn to narrative in their quest to understand the world around them. The use of real storybooks in the EFL classroom may incur some educational value. However, for the development of L2 English vocabulary among very young learners with little prior vocabulary, explicit instructional techniques may be more effective.

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**Luke Winn** is a part-time lecturer of English at both Utsunomiya University and Hakuoh University in Tochigi, Japan. He was a primary school teacher in the UK before gaining a Master's degree in ELT. His research interests are elementary English education in Japan and young learners' vocabulary acquisition. He is also involved in teacher training in English education.



## Appendix

- *Text*: “Sheep shove. Sheep grunt. Sheep don’t think to look up front.”
- *Definition*: Point to the picture of shoving action; “Shoving is the same as pushing. The sheep are shoving the car.”