

From Picture Books to Leveled Readers: Bridging the Gaps in the Progress of Japanese Elementary School Children's English Communication Skills While Fostering Intercultural Understanding

Corazon T. KATO¹⁾

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to discuss the potential advantages of incorporating picture books (PBs) and leveled readers (LRs) in the English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum for Japanese public elementary schools to assist elementary school children in attaining some balanced skills in English communication and gain intercultural understanding. Until recently, English PBs were lightly accommodated in Japanese public elementary schools, despite the fact that reading picture books and 'Kamishibai' to the children by parents, siblings, teachers, and caregivers is profoundly embedded in the Japanese culture and society. The process of 'reading aloud' and 'light reading' in English classes through English PBs and LRs can help bridge the gaps in balancing the growth of EFL communication skills by facilitating the development of reading and writing competencies (Kato, 2009). To substantiate this claim, studies from other EFL school settings profess the benefits of using PBs for language literacy development of EFL learners (Birketveit, 2015; Khaiyahli, 2014). Research also shows that PBs and LRs are excellent materials to stimulate intercultural awareness and understanding (Dolan, 2014). This article highlights the relevance of integrating PBs and LRs in the English classroom to assist in the development of the EFL communication skills of Japanese elementary school children with an emphasis on reading and writing while promoting intercultural understanding.

Key words: Picture Books, Leveled Readers, reading, writing, intercultural understanding

1. Introduction

Since the EFL program was officially administered in Japanese elementary schools for grades 5 and 6 from 2011 under the program 'Gaikokugo Katsudo' or Foreign Language Activity (FLA), current evidence shows that the elementary school English program is gaining progress in catering to the development of EFL listening and speaking communication skills. Uematsu (2015) reported that listening and speaking skills, as well as 'international communication,' are given favorable reactions by Japanese children, and the latter as the most approved. This results in the continuing positivity towards the learning of English in junior high

schools for many students. However, the optimism in the EFL program in public elementary schools, could not convincingly be justified if the EFL curriculum is providing a balance impact on children's EFL communication skills development, as only speaking and listening skills are emphasized since its early implementation until the current classroom practices.

Triggered by the future full-fledged implementation of the EFL program and the approaching Olympic Games in 2020, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) continues to enhance the English curriculum of Japanese

1) 短期大学部幼児教育学科

public elementary education. Nonetheless, the latest revamp of the development of the elementary school EFL program is still largely focused on the listening and speaking competencies. The fact that the gap between listening/speaking skills and reading/writing skills has remained wide — since the introduction of English in elementary public schools in early 2000 — means that it is essential to instigate measures to elevate the status of reading and writing skills and assist the children to gain some balanced competencies in the development of EFL communication skills at a primary level. Kato (2012) reported that reasons such as children still learning to write in their first language (L1) and “teaching reading and writing English skills requires considerable expertise for educators” (p. 153) were some of the common issues cited earlier as to why reading and writing were factored out of the equation in the early implementation of EFL programs. Even up to the present time, MEXT has not issued a full mandate that reading and writing should be comprehensively taught in public elementary schools. However, some schools have taken the initiatives by introducing reading and writing skills gradually in their English programs. An observation in one particular school revealed a class routine for the fifth and sixth grades. During the last segment of the lesson, students practiced writing in their notebooks after the teacher had written the target language phrases on the board to recap the English lesson.

Uematsu (2015), in his longitudinal study on English Learning in Elementary School (ELES), claims that when MEXT changed the curriculum and allowed teachers to show English spelling when they teach the sound system (even the primary focus of the curriculum is on the development of speaking and listening skills), one of the unique findings was the improvement not only on speaking and listening but also in vocabulary/grammar in grades 7 and 8, and reading in grade 7. The result can be taken to mean that even though the curriculum relies heavily on

speaking and listening, the slight integration of showing to children how words are spelled has a gradual positive effect on their acquiring the readiness to read. The result also validates the claims of the input hypothesis in that by adding one step to the learner’s current linguistic competence, he or she will progress to the next level naturally (Krashen, 2003). In addition, Kato (2009) reported that corresponding to the ages of the learners and levels of materials, primary school children who are introduced to the reading of English PBs, those progressing toward LRs and even graded readers can develop competence not only in speaking and listening but gain awareness and skills in early reading and writing as well. Based on the findings mentioned, one can argue that reading and writing skills can be accommodated very well in the Japanese public elementary schools.

Simultaneously, English PBs and LRs were found to be beneficial in promoting intercultural awareness and understanding. PBs and LRs carry powerful cultural messages that can stimulate intercultural education (Dolan, 2014). Quality PBs can enrich the intercultural experience of children by learning from their own culture and others. Thus, inculcating global consciousness to help prepare learners for future, real-life situations.

1.1 Intercultural Understanding

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2016, p. 10), “it is necessary to foster global individuals in the early stages of elementary to lower and upper secondary schools.” Recently, MEXT (2017) points out that “it is necessary to develop people who can act independently with a global point of view in a society that is becoming more international.” MEXT is working towards the following:

- (1) enhancing education to deepen international understanding and teach foreign languages,
- (2) promoting international exchange, (3)

enhancing education of Japanese children overseas, and (4) enhancing education for returning Japanese children from overseas and foreign children in Japan. (MEXT, 2017, International Education Division, para. 1).

The spread of English as a global lingua franca has been reshaping the English language as its users purposely adapt it according to their cultural needs. These gave rise to varieties of new English. The increasing mobility of humans has also expanded the cultural and language contact with these varieties, causing inevitable conflicts. Therefore, promoting intercultural education in the classroom is vital for the development of intercultural awareness and understanding for Japanese YLs.

Stories represent various cultures and undoubtedly facilitate the acquisition of intercultural awareness and understanding. Through the broad components of culture — shared experiences, behaviors, thoughts, traditions, values, and modes of communication (Croucher, 2017) — EFL learners will learn to be conscious of their own culture. The verbal context in PBs and LRs, in which the stories are read aloud and the images displayed can transport the children to another world (Kato, 2009), expands their vision of life. PBs and LRs can foster intercultural understanding as learners try to make a connection with their own culture as well as that of others.

Ideally, in higher grades, while broadening the intercultural understanding of children, stories can nurture critical thinking skills. The powerful message and positive values — cultural and social — instilled in the stories can stimulate intercultural communication. For example, “London Bridge Is Falling Down,” a traditional nursery rhyme and story, can lead to a dialogue about the history of the London Bridge; the story “We Are All Alike...We Are All Different” illustrates different nationalities and encourages multicultural activities; “Momotaro,” the popular Japanese folk tale, teaches many virtues of

the Japanese.

1.2 Definition of terms

Picture Books — Most dictionaries define a picture book as a book that has a lot of pictures and not so many words, and the illustrations are as important as the verbal texts.

Leveled Readers — a collection of books organized into levels of difficulty from the easy to complex books (Pinnel, in Scholastic, 2017).

Light reading — Collins English Dictionary defines it as reading which is not considered too difficult.

Read aloud — TeacherVision (n. d.) online simply defines it as “reading aloud” and reading of print that students “might not be able to read” (p. 1). The process also recognizes that young people from pre-school to high school have naturally better listening levels than reading levels.

Dialogic Reading — It is the process of reading during which “the adult asks questions about the pictures and text as the child listens and comments. It helps the reader anticipate story structure and events and mimic the author’s phrasing” (O’Connor, 2007, p. 3).

Young Learners (YLs) — in this context, YLs are children learning EFL from six to twelve years old.

Intercultural understanding — It “involves awareness, knowledge and understanding of many aspects of [one’s own and] other cultures, for the purpose of living together peacefully and harmoniously” (De Leo, 2017, p. 12).

2. Learning Theories and Beliefs in Relation to the Use of Picture Books and Leveled Readers

2.1 The Brain

Science affirms that a person’s brain is more active when he/she sees pictures than when that individual sees print. According to Medina (2008), it is because the eyes are drawn to pictures first. “Pictures are more efficient delivery mechanisms of information than text, and more efficient to give

information to a neuron" (p. 238). The neurons are responsible for delivering messages to the brain and the parts of the body. How does the transmission of a message occur? A neuron will attach the message to another neuron and then to another until these eventually reach the various parts of the body. It is reported that when children are reading more books at home and school, more activities that involve the processing of visual association are going on in their brains. Medina (2008) further stated that the vision is the most dominant sense in humans, engaging about fifty percent of the brain's resources. To be more specific, visual receptors are thirty times more numerous than auditory receptors (Trelease, 2013), suggesting that humanity is capable of learning best through pictures.

Taking into consideration the information mentioned on the role of the visual sense in learning EFL, what if the illustrations presented are also heard and spoken? The sensory organs work together, and the brain is further activated to help the working memories hold the information for longer. The process can thus boost the brain's capacity and extend the storage of information (Kato, 2009), which favors foreign language learning, for example, the retention of vocabulary and phrases.

Gardner (2011, p. 60) claimed that "there is a clear plasticity in the nervous system... especially during the early periods of growth, and with its sprouting and pruning, there may well be tremendous resilience and adaptability in the system." In light of the nervous system's flexibility, Maria Montessori (Emily, 2016) stated that a child's brain, from birth to age six, is like a sponge that can absorb everything. Therefore, considering the pundits' assertions, it is highly possible that a person can acquire certain intellectual skills when provided with a suitable intervention at the right time. These intellectual skills can be nurtured to bloom, depending on the type and amount of intervention given, the motivation of the learner, and the growth

of the individual's cognitive system. Significant findings have reported that exposing young EFL learners to a variety of PBs through a reading aloud approach will work to their advantage in the long run, as what the mind absorbs in the early years will affect the adult life (Maunz, in Emily, 2016).

2.2 Input (Comprehension) Hypothesis

According to Krashen (2003), language teachers can depend on 'comprehensible input' after other methods such as grammar rule, repetition drills, and computers have been tested. The 'input hypothesis' asserts that the only way a language is acquired is by understanding the message, and this is highly achievable when the environment and materials are rich in context. In addition, when the classroom situation is contextually enriched, linguistic processing is less necessary.

Pictures have long been hailed for their effectiveness to facilitate communication. Humans throughout their existence, have communicated through pictures, as shown by history. In foreign language learning, input can be more comprehensible, especially the beginner level, by using pictures, as they add to the context of the learning environment.

Take the teacher researcher's experience in teaching English to adult South East Asian Indo-Chinese refugees, who did not receive any English instructions prior to the English course. The use of visual aids by using pictures and concrete materials had highly assisted in the vocabulary development and contributed to the betterment of comprehension of the subject content. On the one hand, adult EFL learners skillfully practice 'active learning;' that is, they have the abilities to search for connections between new and already known information mentally. Adult learners, having had many episodes in life, are capable of framing ideas based on their life experiences, thus increasing comprehension. In contrast, young learners have minimal experience in

life. Hence, pictures can augment an increase in understanding to facilitate learning. Most educators would agree with Boyd and Jones (1977, p. 94) that “pictorialization frequently succeeds when words fail” as print alone is not motivating to young learners when learning a foreign language.

Krashen (2003) also compares the importance of pictures to make input comprehensible to the Total Physical Response (TPR) method promoted by Asher (1977, in Krashen 2003). Comprehension Input can be enhanced through multisensory activities; TPR is known for the use of all senses. It is therefore very appropriate that the classroom hours of EFL learners should provide a learning situation with an abundance of natural comprehensible input; what students see around them and what is presented to them should be meaningful in their lives.

In the case of Japanese children, a richer contextual environment should be taken into consideration, since EFL lessons are only given once a week in public schools, and the English language is seldom or even rarely used outside the classrooms. The annual “35 hours” (Uematsu, 2015, p. 1) of contact with English in school is nowhere to deliver results. As they help prepare elementary school children to meet the competency requirements in EFL learning in later years, when reading and writing skills are required, PBs and LRs are not only practical. They have also been proven to be effective resources that can contribute more to comprehensible input with less pressure in EFL learning.

2.3 Motivation and Meaning

Apparently, teachers' classroom experiences using illustrations often show that no matter how poor the motivation levels of students are, pictures are powerful tools that can attract learners' attention so that they can connect to the lesson. According to what classroom experts maintain, providing students

with access to a wealth of interesting materials is not enough to motivate them to read, and one way to lure them into reading is by providing time for them to do it. Sustained silent reading (SSR) is the process wherein “students read whatever they please (within reason) for a short time each day and there is no accountability required” (Krashen, 2003, p.18). Research on SSR has indicated the technique's delivery of positive results in increasing motivation. Culturally, Japanese elementary school children have long been exposed to the SSR process in their first language (L1), be it at home or school. Substantial reports on the success of SSR through the personal crusade of Hiroshi Hayashi continue to thrive in Japan: In 2006, more than 3,500 Japanese schools began their school day with SSR (Trelease, 2013). However, doing SSR in elementary school in the EFL context is still suspect as reading in English is not explicitly taught in public schools. In reality, most public elementary school teachers also lack the teaching abilities to read story books aloud, and those who have the skills are hesitant to try due to the low level of confidence in their English skills. For instance, reading stories aloud could demand various intonations and articulate pronunciations for the stories to have more impact on the listeners.

In the current and previous EFL programs mandated by MEXT, the reading of stories in English is not given much attention. However, depending on the school's English program, the hired assistant language teachers (ALTs) are encouraged to share their competence to read aloud and tell stories in the classroom. A visit to one particular school revealed that the ALT read stories aloud on a televised program so all students could watch. By doing so, the school can maximize the ALT's presence during school hours. However, this could be true only for that school or some schools but not for all schools. In most cases, even if there are interesting books available, the ALTs are not always present to perform the reading task. Therefore, the burden to foster the development of English reading skills

through reading in English is not well promoted in Japanese public schools.

In the EFL classroom, many reading materials in existence actually do not promote intrinsic motivation because children cannot find meaning in what they read. In reality, it is highly observed in Japanese (private) English classrooms that many of the EFL reading materials for young and older children often promote intensive reading activities. Undoubtedly, intensive reading is regarded as beneficial in learning EFL, but since most elementary Japanese children do not yet have the ability to verbalize the text in the textbook or story books, the motivation to read will be shallow if presented with many prints, as written words alone are often deficient to provide meaning (Boyd and Jones, 1977).

Picture books manifest two processes of representation that can work interchangeably depending on the readers' interpretation: visual and verbal (Birketveit, 2015). For young learners, the images can give more support to the creation of the meaning of the story than verbal communication. The pictures serve as stimuli for the children, encouraging them to decipher the meaning of events in the story even if they do not grasp the full sense of the words and directing their engagement with the material.

As claimed by Nikolajeva and Scott (2006: 1 in Birketveit, 2015, p. 4), the picture's role is "to describe," and the role of the verbal text is "to narrate." Interesting pictures can often spark children's enthusiasm to keep turning the pages. They see reading as less stressful but rather enjoyable and rewarding. Light reading using PBs is enjoyable in the sense that the process can allow some relaxation. Children can do it with a friend or family member, either in school or at home. Light reading using PBs is also rewarding as, sooner or later, children can gather linguistic benefits commensurate with the amount of time that they invest

in it. As is widely observed in many classrooms, when learners find the materials meaningful, they develop an intrinsic motivation, thus making learning fun and productive. In fact, many PBs are promoted across the curriculum to help learners construct the meaning of the subject content, consequently making learning less painful, as children find meaning through the illustrations faster.

As the use of EFL becomes more prolific in the Japanese society, brought about by the globalization of English, the advancement in educational technology in the twenty-first century has also revolutionized EFL educational materials. For quite a long time, audiobooks have proven to be excellent resources for language teaching and learning. The audio components can further provide linguistic context and cultural exchange. Kato (2009) mentioned that while reading and listening to audio books, children can repeatedly hear correct pronunciation, vocabulary, word patterns, and phrases, leading to the better recall of information. In addition, the sound effects in the story can intensify the emotions of the listeners and readers. The combination of these sound effects and pictures presented to the learners can have a powerful and potentially beneficial impact on the working memories of the brain. As a consequence, the events of the story are easily remembered as the different pathways — seeing, hearing, speaking, feeling — of learning are being utilized, hence influencing the depth of language retention. Moreover, the voices in the story are also naturally authentic, exposing learners to different forms of English and thus introducing the children to the concept of global Englishes, which is congruent with MEXT's goal of promoting intercultural understanding and communication — cultural and social values are often depicted in illustrations and recordings.

2.4 Communication

One way to introduce children to natural communication is through reading and listening to stories. Through the right selections of PBs and LR, appropriate to their levels, children will become acquainted with the natural language. As observed in classes, children are naturally good at playing with their imagination that when presented with wordless PBs, they can start the interaction by asking questions. Thereby, making PBs highly functional material for introducing ideas.

Reading aloud can stimulate interaction between the reader and the listener, resulting in a productive use of language. Often, the interaction with the story is directed to the child's interest as the classroom activity of reading PBs can lead to "dialogic story reading" (Whitehurst et al., 1988, in O'Connor 2007, p.20). According to research, dialogic reading is "useful in the first years of reading acquisition in kindergarten, first and second grades (Goldberg, Reese and Gallimore, 1992 in O'Connor, 2007, p.21).

2.5 Language Awareness and Fluency

Experienced language teachers can attest that children become aware of how words are used in a foreign language when they repeatedly hear them. In language acquisition, the presence of an adult who consistently communicates with the child verbally, such as telling stories, or talking about the daily routine, or by listening to adults talking to each other can highly influence the child's vocabulary development, be it in the first language (L1), second language (L2) or third language (L3). Similarly, the immediate availability of technologies in every home nowadays has considerably influenced the dynamics of many families, that young children have freedom to stay in front of televisions for long hours and gain access to electronic devices, such as computers, iPads, and iPhones, to name a few. The spontaneous exposure to these gadgets can provide language

awareness to the child, for children are natural learners and are good at imitating and manipulating languages.

Take the case of Kevin (pseudonym), a three-year-old boy born to Filipino parents living in Dubai. According to Kevin's mother, they use English most of the time when communicating with Kevin but at the same time speak Visayan and Hiligaynon dialects. Kevin also regularly watches his favorite YouTube program, 'Super Simple' in English. Furthermore, he watches Arabic programs on TV, and he is interested in watching Italian and Pakistani TV programs as well. Having met Kevin personally, the author was impressed to hear him converse in English fluently and was surprised to watch him read in English and even three-syllable words with ease. While riding the train, Kevin showed off his Arabic skills as he could successfully mimic the Arabic train announcements. When asked about the usage of Visayan and Hiligaynon, Kevin's mom revealed that he could understand them and used them both sparingly. As for the Italian TV, Kevin's mom confessed, that she made him stop watching it because he tried to speak in English with an Italian accent (C. L. Uy, personal communication, March 10, 2017).

This corroborates testimonies told by many parents living in foreign countries that technology affects a child's language development; even without the presence of a native speaker around them, children in the EFL environment can develop a word tank, or vocabulary storage, and converse in L2 or L3 as influenced by their situations.

In an EFL setting like Japan, reading aloud of picture story books to children should be encouraged even more at the earlier ages. There are pieces of evidence that the unconstrained practice of exposing learners to repeated phrases can definitely develop language awareness, and PBs and LR are more effective resources in achieving this than watching television.

Research revealed that watching television and verbal communication, use a lot of high-frequency words only, implying that the vocabulary stock that can be accumulated is less; the words are repeatedly recycled. This is highly evident in public elementary and junior high school classrooms, where high-frequency vocabulary recurs again and again to practice the target language patterns in speaking and listening activities emulated in the textbook. As a consequence, when students are confronted with new words, their confidence level is shaken. However, by reading PBs and LRs, learners will be introduced to less frequently used and unknown words, therefore adding new vocabulary to their bank of English lexis and at the same time providing knowledge of familiar phrases and language structures.

One distinct feature of LRs is the authenticity of the language. Since LRs are intended for learners whose L1 is English, the stories are written naturally. Therefore, reading aloud of LRs to EFL learners can improve vocabulary, accuracy, and fluency—learners become more familiar with natural language structures and gain exposure to less frequently used words and phrases. Critically, LRs may have many unknown words (Takara, 2017) that may obstruct learning, yet the difficulties can be avoided by choosing the appropriate levels for the learners. According to Day (2017), "much of L2 learning is the result of input that is incidental (not intentional)," and authentic books like LRs are excellent resources. Besides, if regularly implemented, reading aloud of LRs, can help boost learners' confidence—can assist them not to fret when they encounter longer and more complex language structures in higher grades. More so, it also helps develop their language learning strategies and awareness for solutions to overcome the difficulties. Above all, the adults, reading aloud should provide support (i.e. by explaining) to make learning easy and enjoyable.

2.6 Reading and Writing

The use of English PBs, even when wordless, and LRs by reading aloud are valuable steps in introducing the readiness to read, and based on classroom findings, the process can also promote the readiness to write. Moreover, can even promote a lifetime habit of reading.

According to reading advocates (e. g., Fielding, Wilson, & Anderson, 1984; Nagy et al., 1985 in Carlisle and Katz in Birsh, 2005, p.348), "the best way to learn words is to read and, ideally, read a lot." However, reading is not easy for all—some learners can easily get it while others struggle. It is highly possible that the degree of unfamiliar words can lead to difficulties and frustrations and may create poor motivation.

How can schools help the children progress in EFL communication skills to achieve positive attitudes in reading? Schools can cater to the development of reading skills by empowering the English curriculum with stories, and in this case, PBs and LRs are a total package. Studies have shown that children in kindergarten to grade six learn words by listening to books read aloud to them (Eller, Pappas, & Brown, 1988; Stahl, Richek, & Vandevier, 1991 in Carlisle and Katz in Birsh, 2005). Importantly, children who are learning EFL should be informed that they do not have to understand word for word everything they hear and see when reading PBs and LRs. They should be taught and encouraged that when confronted with unknown words, the abilities to search for meaning, predict, and guess are necessary learning strategies to enhance the development of reading comprehension strategies such as cognitive and metacognitive (Khaiyahli, 2014).

The development of early reading to young learners can be approached in both ways: phonics and the reading aloud of PBs stories and LRs. Kato (2009, 2012), for several years, had explored phonemic

awareness, phonics activities, and multisensory instructions to Japanese children from K1 to Gr 3, and along with these, had incorporated interactive storytelling by reading aloud and retelling to all of her classes. Undoubtedly, in her studies, phonemic awareness and phonics proved to be outstanding in developing pre-reading and writing skills, and eventually, early readers. On the other hand, picture books had probably developed learners who had the desire to read. These results indicate that children who undergo phonics instruction develop a better understanding that a word is made up of sounds. They learn to decode, thus giving them stronger pre-reading abilities. Acquiring these basic reading foundations could help them for a lifetime. However, Kato (2012) reiterated that there is also a tendency to overdo phonics and it can impede learning for some who find it difficult. Still, including some phonics exercises in teaching children to read and write is advisable, for it provides balance in the process (Pinter, 2017). The benefits of phonics cannot be doubted; however, the adage, "If there's no pain, there's no gain," holds true for children who do not enjoy phonics. Therefore, Kato (2012) recommends that using multisensory phonic activities can make learning fun for children. Since the teaching of phonics could require much training and expertise, reading stories aloud is an excellent recourse that can result in a pleasant experience for many children. Trelease (2013), makes the point that reading aloud can "build vocabulary, condition the child's brain to associate reading with pleasure, create background knowledge, provide a reading role model, and plant the desire to read" (p.6).

The language literacy skills that could be developed by reading PBs and LRs not only impact reading competence but also writing competence as well. This is because reading reinforces writing and vice versa. Classroom experiences attest that the reading of PBs and LRs are excellent springboards from which learners of all ages can be inspired to write. From a very young learner to an adult,

writing can vary from a scribble, a single line, a sketch, a letter, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, several paragraphs, and eventually essays or an entire picture. Depending on the objectives of the lesson, writing can be made possible and fun for children as it is still an area where they can develop the recognition of individual letters, practice inventive spelling, or simply draw in the case of children with special needs.

Introducing writing through stories can be meaningful to children as the process can help the child to discover his or her learning style. It is highly observable in language classes that some children can express themselves better in writing than with reading, speaking, and listening. Therefore, this process also allows fair play among the children in the classroom. Who can tell that a particular writing experience can help unearth an artist, a poet, a budding writer in the language classroom? The school plays distinctly significant roles in exploring ways and means to assist learners in discovering their potential abilities, recognizing these abilities, and nurturing them to become successful individuals.

Many private English schools have received positive feedback on using PBs and LRs, and with that success, have built Graded Readers collections and eventually explored Extensive Reading to empower children's abilities to read and write. Children who went through the experience of early reading and writing have developed some understanding of alphabetic knowledge and principles, and therefore have a better edge among children in the mainstream classes (public schools). In the same way, many parents have seen the importance of reading and writing skills in children's preparations to pass the demanding English skill tests like Eiken and TOEIC in higher learning. Since public elementary schools do not adequately teach reading and writing skills, many families resort to enrolling their children in cram schools to prepare them better for the challenges of higher education. Reading and

writing are parts of the essential basic language literacy skills that can equip elementary graduates to face further learning in higher years as reading and writing are compulsory.

3. From Picture Books to Leveled Readers

Reading aloud of LR for elementary school children could be a gateway to light reading. It paves the way for an opportunity to acquire the desire to want to read independently; a catalyst for SSR. Since the prints in LR are simple and the stories are short, they can slowly help build confidence if children find success in the process. LR can also bridge the way to heavier reading, such as the case of reading Graded Readers. Takase (2009) reported that a majority of Japanese high school students preferred LR for the following reasons:

1. beginner levels of LR are easy to read for students at the lowest English level;
2. bigger font sizes are used compared to those in GR or school textbooks;
3. stories are simple, thus, easy to comprehend;
4. it is not time-consuming to finish a whole book;
5. pictures and illustrations help learners understand the story;
6. pictures and illustrations teach learners different cultures;
7. stories, classic tales, in particular, are familiar to learners as they read them in Japanese when they were little;
8. LR are easy enough for any learners to concentrate in reading. (p.3)

A survey on a Social Networking Site (Facebook) has resulted in the following list of PBs and LR used by classroom experts and teacher trainers of YLs based in Japan.

Table 1. List of Picture Books and Leveled Readers

<i>Author/ Publisher</i>	<i>Recommended Titles/ Levels</i>
<i>Annie Kubler</i>	<i>What's the Time Mr. Wolf? (4th Grade)</i>
<i>Chris Haughton</i>	<i>Shh! We Have a Plan (1st Grade), Little Lost Owl (2nd Grade)</i>
<i>Eileen Christelow</i>	<i>Five Little Monkey series (Audio CD)</i>
<i>Eric Carle (et. al.)</i>	<i>Brown Bear, The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Where are you going? To see my Friend!, etc.</i>
<i>Eugene Trivizas</i>	<i>The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig (6th Grade)</i>
<i>Iza Trařani</i>	<i>Baa baa Black Sheep, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, Itsy Bitsy Spider, Mary Had a Little Lamb, Shoo Fly, etc.</i>
<i>Jules Feiffer</i>	<i>Bark George (3rd Grade)</i>
<i>Karen Katz</i>	<i>No Hitting, Excuse me, I Can Share, etc.</i>
<i>Leo Lionni</i>	<i>Fish is Fish, Swimmy, It's Mine, etc.</i>
<i>Marcus Pfister</i>	<i>The Rainbow Fish series</i>
<i>Mari Nakamura et.al.</i>	<i>Lily and the Moon (Audio CD)</i>
<i>Mikiko Nakamoto, et al. (Apricot Publishing)</i>	<i>Who Stole the Cookies, My Pet, Our Sweet Home, Pal the Parrot, Beautiful Butterfly, Me Myself, etc.</i>
<i>Nick Sharratt</i>	<i>Shark in the Park, Ketchup on your Corn Flakes</i>
<i>Susan Meddaugh</i>	<i>Martha Speaks (5th Grade)</i>
<i>Collins Big Cat Series</i>	<i>Leveled Books</i>
<i>Dolphin Readers</i>	<i>Leveled Books (Audio CD)</i>
<i>Longman Literacy Land</i>	<i>Leveled Books</i>
<i>Matsuka Phonics Inc. (Mpi) Building Blocks</i>	<i>Levels 0-3</i>
<i>Oxford Reading Tree</i>	<i>Read with Biff, Chip and Kipper Levels 1-3</i>
<i>Springboard Connect MacMillan</i>	<i>Leveled Books</i>

4. Recommendations

The anticipation of introducing the readiness to read and write in the mainstream classes in Japanese public elementary schools has long been suspended even though considerable proofs are presented that it is necessary to teach reading and writing skills. The reality is that even with the enormous efforts by the Japanese public elementary schools to realize the objectives of the English programs for grades 5 and 6 through listening and speaking activities and games, Japanese children are still short on communication skills when entering the junior high schools as the curriculum requires students to read and write. Therefore, it is high time that schools should find ways and means how to accommodate the teaching of reading and writing skills in the EFL curriculum to assist the development of more balanced communication skills for children. The early years in elementary school from grades 1 to 4 could be a favorable opportunity to explore the readiness to read and write, and picture books and leveled readers can be the best options other than phonics.

Schools can promote intercultural awareness and understanding by constructing a learning environment that is rich in intercultural backgrounds. In this article, PBs and LRs are given emphasis, as research shows the excellent benefits they can offer to transport an abundance of intercultural experience in the classroom. However, teachers should also receive training on intercultural education. Similarly, bringing in various nationalities for actual intercultural experience can deepen intercultural awareness and understanding. Who else can be the best promoters of culture and language other than the people from that culture?

School roles:

A collection of PBs and LRs is vital for the employment and success of any English reading program. Schools can definitely build a bank of resources by creating from what they already have. However,

careful considerations should be taken when choosing PBs and LRs. Authorities on extensive reading can be consulted for help.

Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) roles:

The presence of ALTs can be maximized to avail their linguistic competence and promote intercultural understanding and communication. Schools can allocate time for reading activities by adapting what public pilot schools have been modeling such as, reading aloud on a televised school program. The reading aloud of PBs and LRs should be explored from Grade 1 to Grade 6.

Teacher roles:

The lack of confidence in Japanese teachers will no longer be a hindrance in promoting reading development for children if PBs and LRs with audio components are adopted in the classroom. The audio component can facilitate the 'read aloud' to motivate children to read along. By providing these materials, children will be stimulated to see, hold, listen to, and finally go through the pages of the books, and eventually start reading. By setting up a reading corner and designating a particular day and time to read aloud, it can raise reading awareness in the classroom and also for the entire school. Homeroom teachers (HRTs) should also consider this as an additional experience for professional development. The familiarization of foreign materials will make the classroom more intercultural, for the books bring in varieties of cultures.

Student roles:

Children should be informed of the importance of reading PBs and LRs. They should be encouraged to read as many books as they can with the ultimate objective of enjoying reading.

Family roles:

Why involve the family? Reading aloud could become a family event in the case of lower grade learners as they cannot read yet; as such, grand-

parents, parents and older siblings can develop meaningful bonding moments with little ones. This precious time could provide a good break from any family's usual routine. However, once children develop an interest in reading, and eventually start to read on their own, parents are advised by experts not to stop reading to them aloud but to continue doing so. Trelease (2013, p. 71) points out that "the seeds that are planted for the love of reading may not always bear immediate fruit, but if we are patient enough, there will be rewards."

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper has shown that the utilization of PBs and LR in the EFL classroom can reduce the wide gaps between the listening and speaking skills regarding reading and writing competencies among Japanese elementary school children and promote intercultural understanding. However, this article could not give full justice to the substantial relevance of using PBs and LR in the language development of EFL learners. Although it seems challenging, the policy makers of the EFL curriculum in Japanese public elementary schools should look into the benefits of PBs and LR mentioned herein and apply their uses in EFL classrooms.

References

- Birketveit, A. (2015). Picture Books in EFL: Vehicles of visual and verbal literacy. Retrieved from <http://journal.uia.no/index.php/NJMLM/article/view/108/105#.WSKiDBOGPo>
- Birsh, J. R. (Ed.). (2005). *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills*. Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. Inc.
- Boyd G. A. & Jones, D. M. (1977). *Teaching Communication Skills in the Elementary School*. New York, New York: D. Van Nostrand Company.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Carlisle, J. F. & Katz, L. A. (2005). Word Learning and Vocabulary Instruction. In J. R. Birsh (Ed.), *Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills* (pp. 345-376). Baltimore, Maryland: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. Inc.
- Croucher, S. M. (2017). Culture and Values in Intercultural Communication. *Global Perspective on Intercultural Communication*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Day, R. (2017). *Patterns and Practices in ER—Past, Present and Predictions*. Plenary speech at The 4th World Congress on Extensive Reading, Tokyo.
- De Leo, J. (2017). *Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Tools. Education for Intercultural Understanding*. UNESCO. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001890/189051E.pdf>
- Dolan, A. M. (2014). *Intercultural Education, Picture Books and Refugees: Approaches for Language Teachers*. Retrieved from <http://clejournal.org/wpcontent/uploads/2014/05/Dolan-Intercultural-Education-Picturebooks-and-Refugees.pdf>
- Emily (2016). Raising Children with Montessori's Wisdom. Retrieved from <http://ageofmontessori.org/why-your-childs-brain-is-like-a-sponge/>
- Gardner, H. (2011). *Frames of Mind: The theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York, New York: Basic Books.
- Kato, C. T. (2009). The Effects of Multisensory Instruction to Japanese Elementary School Children Including Learners with Special Needs. *The Journal of Chubu Gakuin University and Chubu Gakuin College*, 10, 67-75.
- Kato, C. T. (2012). Exploring Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Activities in the EFL Context to Japanese Children (K1-Gr3). *The Journal of Chubu Gakuin University and Chubu Gakuin*

- College, 13, 153-163.
- Khairyahli, A. T. A. (2014). *Exploring the Use of Picture Books to Explicitly Teach Reading Comprehension Strategies in Libyan EFL Classrooms*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259742231_ESL_Elementary_Teachers%27_Use_of_Children%27s_Picture_Books_to_Initiate_Explicit_Instruction_of_Reading_Comprehension_Strategies
- Krashen, S. (2003). *Explorations in Language Acquisition and Use*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Light Reading (n.d.). In Collins Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/light-reading>
- Medina, J. (2008). *Brain Rules*. Seattle, WA: Pear Press.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)-Japan. (2017). *International Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.mext.go.jp/en/policy/education/elsec/title02/detail02/1373861.htm>
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)-Japan. (2017). *Overview of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology*, (2016, September). Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/en/about/pablication/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/02/15/1374478_001.pdf
- O'Connell, S. (2015). *Connecting Culture and Language: An analysis of the future intercultural education in Japanese High School English Language Education*. Retrieved from <http://portale.unime.it/agon/files/2016/04/S0303.pdf>
- O'Connor, R. E. (2007). *Teaching Word Recognition: What works for Special-Needs Learners*. New York, New York: The Guilford Press.
- Pinnel, S. (2017). *What is Leveled Reading?* Retrieved from www.scholastic.com/teachers/articles/teaching-content/what-leveled-reading/
- Pinter, A. (2017). *Teaching Young Language Learners*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Takara, N. (2017). *What Can We Learn from Students' Reading Records?* Paper presented at The 4th World Congress on Extensive Reading, Tokyo.
- Takase, A. (2009). *The Effects of Different Types of Extensive Reading Materials on Reading Amount, Attitude, and Motivation*. Retrieved from <http://jera-tadoku.jp/papers/2009-03-Takase.pdf>
- TeacherVision (n. d.). Reading Aloud. Retrieved from <https://www.teachervision.com/reading-aloud/reading-aloud#>
- Trelease, J. (2013). *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York, New York: Penguin Books.
- Uematsu, S. (2015). *Long-term Effects of Learning English: Experiences from Japanese Public Schools*. Singapore: Springer.