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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Selecting and using English picture books in Japanese elementary schools

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The *Cross-Cultural Understanding Picture Books* (CCUP) project implemented English picture books to teach about U.S. culture during the Period for Integrated Study in elementary schools in Iwate prefecture. This paper introduces a popular English picture book, *Yoko*, used in the project and two pilot lessons. The characteristics that made the book appropriate for the pilot lessons were the relevance of the issues to the students' lives; students' intrinsic interest in the topic; commonalities between the main character and the students; and the comprehensibility, conciseness, and richness of the language. Three uses of English picture books are discussed: using English picture books to provide a rich literary experience, using English picture books to learn about a different culture, and using English picture books to encourage English learning strategies.

この論文では、小学校の総合的な学習の時間においてアメリカ合衆国の文化について教授する方法の一つとして、英語の絵本を活用した国際理解教育開発研究 (CCUP) を紹介する。CCUPによる授業を行った教員によって最も使用された絵本「Yoko」を紹介し、この本を活用した二つのパイロット授業 (pilot lesson) について分析する。絵本「Yoko」が最も教員に選ばれた理由として、絵本のテーマが生徒に身近なものであったことや、この絵本が取り上げた異文化の要素に生徒が興味をもったこと、絵本の主人公と生徒の共通点、文章の簡潔さ、言語的な豊かさ、分かり易さ、ということがあげられた。パイロット授業の分析の結果、授業における英語絵本の使用法について、子供に豊富な文学的な体験を提供するための使用法、異文化を紹介するための使用法、英語学習ストラテジーを促進するための使用法の3つが挙げられた。

Introduction: Cross-cultural understanding using picture books

From March 2007 to December 2007, the Faculty of Education at Iwate University and the Education Development Center (EDC), with funding from the Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership (CGP), collaborated on a project called *Cross-Cultural Understanding Using Picture Books* (CCUP). The objective of CCUP was to teach Japanese elementary school children about U.S. culture using English picture books during the Period for Integrated Study. CCUP was designed not only to teach

students about U.S. culture but to help them understand their own culture better by considering the similarities and differences between the two. EDC selected a total of 15 children's picture books published in the USA and developed accompanying teaching guides for each book (see CCUP, 2007, for a list of the books and links to the teaching guides).

Altogether, 27 pilot lessons were conducted in 20 elementary schools in Iwate during the Period for Integrated Study. Of these lessons, 20 were conducted in one 45-minute period with no follow-up lessons, three were conducted over two consecutive periods (a total of an hour and a half) and four were conducted over two separate 45-minute lessons. Additionally, 21 of these lessons were taught solely by a Japanese elementary school teacher and six were team-taught by a Japanese homeroom teacher (HRT) and a non-Japanese assistant language teacher (ALT). In 11 of the 27 lessons the book was read in English while in the other lessons the Japanese translation of the book was read.

This paper has two objectives: (a) to highlight characteristics of picture books that elementary school aged children are likely to find appealing and (b) to identify the multiple uses of picture books to inspire a broader use of them. The remainder of this paper will focus on the most frequently used book in the CCUP project, *Yoko*, by Rosemary Wells, and two pilot lessons that used the book.

A description of *Yoko*

This section will introduce *Yoko* and consider which of its characteristics are appealing to Japanese elementary school aged children. The following is a summary of the story:

Yoko, an elementary school student, brings a sushi lunch to school that her mother made and is teased by her classmates, all of whom have never seen such a strange looking lunch. After this, her teacher decides to hold an International Food Day party in the class. For the International Food Day, *Yoko*'s classmates, whose parents come from various parts of the world, bring many different kinds of international foods. Although almost all the food is eaten, no one eats *Yoko*'s sushi. A student named Timothy, though, is still hungry and tries *Yoko*'s sushi and loves it. From that day on the two become good friends.

Brewster and Ellis (2005) write that if children are going to listen to a story, first and foremost the content should be enjoyable. Table 1 shows 8 teachers' reasons for choosing *Yoko* for their pilot lessons (Please note that only 8 of 10 teachers who piloted *Yoko* gave reasons for selecting the book). From these reasons, it is apparent that the teachers felt the children would find the topic of food enjoyable. Several pages of the book are devoted to showing the various meals that *Yoko* and her classmates brought to school for lunch as well as the kind of food they brought to the International Food Day.

Table 1. Reasons pilot teachers gave for choosing the book*

- | |
|---|
| <p>T1. There were a lot of different foods that appeared in this book and I thought that students would find them interesting to study.</p> <p>T2. Students could know about the world through focusing on different foods. Students will find this kind of content interesting and easy to understand.</p> <p>T3. This content is easy for students to understand. It discusses culinary culture which children will find interesting.</p> <p>T4. The main topic is food which is familiar to the students. Also, (I) do not have extensive knowledge of the U.S. so I chose a story that has no complicated themes such as regionalism or ethnicity.</p> <p>T5. There were many different world foods that appeared in the book and I thought that students would find them interesting and enjoy studying about them.</p> <p>T6. I thought that food (sushi) would catch the interest of the children.</p> <p>T7. It was similar to the content used for teaching materials for moral education class and the pictures were appealing.</p> <p>T8. I thought it would be easy for students to empathize with.</p> |
|---|

*All responses were translated from English to Japanese by the author. Italics indicate emphasis added by the author.

Not only food, but the main character, Yoko, could be considered appealing to students. According to Takashima (2005), a picture book with a main character that children can relate to will draw their interest. Yoko was one such character; in addition to being close in age to the students, she had Japanese roots. Yoko was teased by her classmates for eating sushi: food that is synonymous with Japanese cuisine. Thus, it is likely that children will empathize with her.

In addition to a character that they can empathize with, children will also enjoy picture books that are relevant to their lives (Kawai, Matsui, & Yanagita, 2001). As most elementary school children at some point experience both sides of teasing, Yoko being teased is an issue that is germane.

Concerning the appropriate features of language in an L2 book to read to children, Wright (1995) states that (a) children should understand the language well enough to enjoy the book, (b) the book should offer children a rich experience of language and, (c) the book should not have long descriptive passages. Regarding the first characteristic, *Yoko* contained many words related to food. Since many English food words are used as loan words in Japanese (e.g., cheese in Japanese is *chi-zu*) children can understand much of the vocabulary in *Yoko*. Concerning the second characteristic, *Yoko* features such words and expressions as “weirdo,” “snack time,” and “swings.” This kind of language can arguably be heard everyday in a U.S. elementary school. Thus, students listening to *Yoko* are exposed to authentic U.S. elementary school English. Regarding the last characteristic, each picture in *Yoko* has no more than a two-sentence description and, thus, the text is not too long.

The uses of English picture books in CCUP

Yoko was read in seven lessons and each one was recorded by digital video camera. The author viewed two of these lessons in person and participated in one of the lessons as an ALT. The recorded version of each lesson was viewed and a classroom observation survey created by EDC was used to analyze how the pre-reading, during-reading, and post-

reading activities were conducted as well as how the students reacted to the lesson. Teachers also completed post-lesson questionnaires in which they answered such questions as why they chose the particular book, how they prepared for the lesson, the strengths and weaknesses of their lesson, and their thoughts on the extent to which the children enjoyed and understood the class. Students' written reflections were also collected in classes where the teacher had required them.

After viewing these seven lessons, three general uses of *Yoko* were identified. These were, using picture books as a means to (a) provide children with a rich literary experience, (b) practice English learning strategies, and (c) learn about a different culture. *Yoko* was read in English in three of the seven lessons. After reviewing the theoretical foundation behind each use, this section will analyze two of the three lessons to demonstrate the different ways in which *Yoko* was utilized.

Picture books as a means to provide children with a rich literary experience

In a rich literary experience, the child is engrossed in a good story, absorbed in it by the passion of the reader, the images of the book, and the message of the story. It is the enthusiasm of the reader that initially draws children into the story, and they are further pulled into it when they can relate the story to their own lives. Children walk away from a rich literary experience discovering something new about this world or being deeply impressed by the emotion they felt from listening to the book being read.

Kawai et al. (2001, pp. 52-53) in discussing the “power” of L1 picture books in the context of Japan, say that picture books are meant to be read aloud, listened to, and viewed rather than read silently. The reason for this is that the combination of the sounds of the words being read and images from the book enable children to make, what they term, their own imaginary world (Kawai et al., 2001, p. 183). When children have entered this imaginary world, they can experience the message of the book. Because children are not capable of the type of abstract thinking that adults engage in, Kawai et al. (2001, p. 159) conclude that it is not necessary for young learners to understand the message completely but rather to remember the emotion they felt when hearing it. It is this emotion children feel that will ensure that the message stays with them. This emotion is also a central part of a rich literary experience.

In the case where students are being read stories in the L2, can they feel a similar emotion? Cameron (2001) writes that children listening to a story in a foreign language will understand and construct the gist of the story in their minds. She elaborates that “children focus their attention not on the words and syntax of the story but on the underlying meaning” (p. 41). This is not to say that children do not need to understand the language when being read a story. However, prioritizing the meaning of a story is essential for feeling the emotion brought forth by the message.

Picture books as a means to practice English learning strategies

The English learning strategies observed during the use of *Yoko* were listening strategies and learning new words in

meaningful contexts. Listening strategies were considered to be a “decision by the listener to make a cognitive or behavior change in order to understand something that is being said” (Rost, 2002, p. 279). Hsiu-Chih (2008) made the connection between the use of English picture books and young EFL learners employing listening strategies. In her study, she investigated 10 experienced Taiwanese elementary school teachers’ views on the value of using English picture books. According to the teachers, story books encourage children to use the pictures to guess the content and use prior knowledge to understand the story. This is supported by Brewster and Ellis (2005, pp. 238-239) who write that story books encourage children to listen for the gist of a story, make predictions about what will happen, and guess the meanings of a text and that these kind of learning strategies will create a foundation from which to build in junior high school.

Teachers in Hsiuh-Chih’s (2008) study also said that English picture books encourage the learning of English words in a meaningful context, because children meet an unknown word in the context of an authentic story rather than in isolation. Thus, students have the opportunity to use the flow of the story, the pictures, and any other means to guess the meaning of an unknown word.

Picture books as a means to teach about culture

How can picture books be used to teach about culture? Children do not learn about culture through reading about it or being lectured about it. Rather they learn about culture through experiencing it (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004, p. 226). Picture books are a means by which children can experience and learn about a new culture. For example, when listening

to a book children can enter the world of the character and thus understand the character’s perspective. Additionally, in follow up activities children can reenact some of the cultural rituals practiced in the book (e.g., performing a tea ceremony) and experience different cultural practices. English picture books serve as an ideal opportunity to help children make comparisons between their culture and another (Brewster & Ellis, 2005, p. 239).

Two CCUP pilot lessons

This section will present parts of two pilot lessons to demonstrate how *Yoko* was used. In both lessons the book was to be covered in two separate periods in which the teachers would read and discuss *Yoko* in the first lesson and study world foods in the second.

Pilot lesson 1

Pilot lesson 1 consisted of 36 elementary students, an HRT, and the author as the ALT. The objectives of the lesson were to (a) realize differences in the values of other cultures and foster an attitude of respect for other cultures, (b) understand that food is a part of culture, and (c) understand the diversity of an American classroom.

In this lesson, the teachers sat on chairs and the students sat on the floor as close as possible to the teachers. The class consisted of a pre-reading discussion (where the students asked the ALT about his favorite food), the book reading, and lastly a post-reading discussion. Most of the class was devoted to reading the book. Before the class, the ALT and HRT met to determine which parts of the book the

ALT would read. When reading the book, the HRT would introduce a page, ask the students to make guesses about the content, cue the ALT to read a specific part of the book, and then ask students what the ALT said. Below is an excerpt of such a session. Here, they have arrived at the part in the story where Yoko opens her lunch box at school and starts to eat her sushi (see text for picture 1). One of the Frank brothers, a classmate, sees Yoko's sushi and starts to tease her (see text for picture 2). The text for each picture and a transcription of the dialogue between the HRT, ALT, and students about the pictures are shown. Please note that the HRT and students spoke in Japanese and the HRT's speech has been translated into English. The ALT spoke in English only. We will examine Transcript 1 to see how the reading of *Yoko* encouraged the use of listening strategies as well as provided children with a rich literary experience.

Text for Picture 1 - Yoko eating her sushi - Yoko opened her willow-covered cooler. Inside was her favorite sushi. Tucked in the rice rolls were the crispiest cucumber, the pinkest shrimp, the greenest seaweed, and the tastiest tuna. (Wells, 1998, p. 8)

Text for Picture 2 - Frank reacting to Yoko's sushi: "What's in your lunch?" asked one of the Franks. "Ick! It's green! It's seaweed!" (Wells, 1998, p. 9)

Transcript 1

| Symbols key | |
|-------------|---|
| - | (.) micro pause |
| - | (1) pause of approx. 1 second, etc. |
| - | <i>Italics</i> indicates non-translated Japanese |
| - | ???? indecipherable talk |
| - | [] indicate an English translation of Japanese left in the transcript |
| - | (()) descriptions of the participants' actions essential to the analysis |
| - | “ ” Indicates when the teacher is reading the book. |

| | | |
|----|------|--|
| 1 | HRT: | ((Pointing to picture 1)) Who likes sushi? |
| 2 | Ss: | I do!????? |
| 3 | HRT: | Yoko also likes sushi and when she eats sushi, this Frank ((Points to Picture 2)) |
| 4 | | |
| 5 | ALT: | Yeah, this is Frank. |
| 6 | HRT: | (1) Let's listen to what Franks says. |
| 7 | ALT: | ((Makes a face)) "What's in your lunch? Ick! It's green! It's seaweed!" ((Frowns)) |
| 8 | | |
| 9 | HRT: | What did he say? |
| 10 | S1: | <i>Kusai</i> [It's smelly] |
| 11 | S2: | <i>Mazui</i> [It tastes bad] |
| 12 | ALT: | ((Makes a face)) Ick! |
| 13 | S3: | <i>Kimochi warui.</i> [It's gross.] |
| 14 | ALT: | ((Reading part of the text for Picture 2)) "It's green!" |
| 15 | S4: | Eh, green? |

| | | |
|----------|------|---|
| 16 17 | ALT: | ((Pointing to the HRT's shirt)) White. (2) ((Pointing to a world map)) Green. |
| 18 | S4: | <i>Midori!</i> [Green] |
| 19 | HRT | ((Points to the picture)) What is green? |
| 20 | S4 | <i>Wasabi!</i> |
| 21 | HRT: | Maybe. |
| 22 | ALT: | (Reading part of the text for Picture 2) "It's seaweed!" |
| 23 | HRT: | Seaweed means <i>nori</i> . How would you feel if this was said to you? |
| 24 | S5: | ???? |
| 25 | HRT: | You would want to punch him? |

In lines 3 through 13 it is apparent that students are being encouraged to use listening strategies. Students here use the picture of Frank and the ALT's expressions (see lines 7 and 13) to guess that Frank does not like Yoko's sushi. These strategies such as using visuals (e.g., pictures) as well as the expression of the speaker or any other clue available to guess the gist of what is being said is arguably a technique that can help students throughout their language learning experiences.

The HRT's last question to the students (see line 23) indicates that he is also encouraging them to empathize with the character by asking them how they would feel if someone said the same thing to them. Previously I wrote that children in a rich literary experience discover something new about this world or are deeply impressed by the emotion they felt. This appears to be the case with this class. For example, Table 2 shows comments from students' reflection papers of *Yoko*. Fifteen of 36 students

expressed sympathy for Yoko, and 7 more students wrote they were happy that Timothy ate Yoko's sushi (see comments from S1 and S2). An additional 10 students wrote that they had made a discovery of some kind. The discoveries ranged from learning that there are many different kinds of food in this world to the idea that sushi is not considered delicious in foreign countries (see comments from S4 and S5).

Table 2. Comments from students' reflections on Yoko

| |
|--|
| S1. There are so many people in Japan who like sushi but I felt sorry (for Yoko) that no one would eat her sushi. |
| S2. Even though sushi in Japan is delicious it was not popular. There were also sad things in the Yoko book we read. |
| S3. I was happy that Timothy ate Yoko's sushi. |
| S4. I thought, wow, there are a lot of different kinds of foods in this world. |
| S5. Sushi is not considered delicious in foreign countries. |

Pilot lesson 2

In pilot lesson 2, there were 30 students. The objectives of the class were to enjoy listening to the book and appreciate the diversity of the U.S. classroom. This class differed from pilot lesson 1 in that there was no ALT and the HRT read the story. At the beginning of the class, the HRT and students had a brief discussion about different foods of the world. Like pilot lesson 1, most of the class was devoted to reading the book and there was little time for a post-reading discussion. Students sat on the floor as close as possible

to the HRT, who sat on a chair. Before the class, the HRT prepared by practicing extensively to read *Yoko*. Although the HRT read the book in English, he interacted with the students in Japanese. In Transcripts 2 and 3, the HRT reads the same pages as those read in pilot lesson 1 (see text for pictures 1 and 2). We will examine these two transcripts to see how the use of *Yoko* provided students with a cultural learning experience and how it encouraged them to learn words in meaningful contexts.

Transcript 2

| | | |
|----|------|--|
| 1 | | “Yoko opened the willow-covered cooler.” <i>yanagi ban bentou bakko wo akemashita</i> . “Inside was her favorite sushi.” <i>Naka ni ha Yoko no suki na</i> “favorite” <i>sushi</i> . |
| 2 | HRT: | |
| 3 | | |
| 4 | Ss: | Sushi ????? |
| 5 | HRT: | “Tucked in the rice rolls” |
| 6 | Ss: | Rice roll ????? |
| 7 | HRT: | “were the crispiest cucumber” |
| 8 | Ss: | <i>kyuuri!</i> [cucumber] |
| 9 | HRT: | <i>Paripari no kyuuri desune</i> . [crispy cucumber, right?] |
| 10 | HRT: | “and the pinkest shrimp.” |
| 11 | Ss | ((Repeating the HRT)) Shrimp? |
| 12 | HRT: | Maybe you don’t know shrimp. What’s the first letter of the alphabet? |
| 13 | Ss: | A! |
| 14 | HRT: | The next? A (3) |
| 15 | S1 | B. eh? |
| 16 | Ss | A (.) B (.) A (.) B |
| 17 | S1: | <i>Ebi!</i> [Shrimp] |

| | | |
|----|------|---|
| 18 | HRT | “The greenest seaweed and the tastiest tuna” |
| 19 | Ss: | Seaweed? |
| 20 | HRT | “and the” (.) <i>nan da</i> (.) “the tastiest tuna” |
| 21 | Ss | <i>tsuna?</i> |
| 22 | HRT | Tuna in Japanese is |
| 23 | S2 | Fish? |
| 24 | S3 | Salmon? |
| 25 | Ss | ((Various students call out names of fish)) |
| 26 | HRT: | You don’t know what it is. It’s <i>maguro</i> . |
| 27 | Ss | Ohhh. |
| 28 | HRT: | ((Rereading the page in Japanese)) <i>Bentou no naka paripari no kyuuri, pinku iro no ebi, midori no kaisou</i> |
| 29 | | |
| 30 | Ss | <i>Kaisou</i> |
| 31 | HRT: | Seaweed |
| 32 | S4: | Seaweed |

As evident in lines 1-3 as well as 28 and 29, the HRT in pilot lesson 2 tended to rely more on translation to relay the meaning of the story than his counterpart in pilot lesson 1. Thus, it is debatable if this lesson afforded students the opportunities to practice English listening strategies. One can make the argument that the students are showing curiosity in learning new words after listening to them in the context of *Yoko*. For example, children are confirming the meanings of the words *rice rolls* and *cucumber* in lines 6 and 8 and inquiring about the meaning of the words *shrimp*, *tuna*, and *seaweed* in lines 11, 21, 19, and 30. From the transcript alone, it is not possible to know whether or not these words were retained in the children’s long term memory but one

can surmise that the children were encountering the words in a meaningful context.

Transcript 3

| | | |
|----------|------|---|
| 34 35 | HRT: | ((Turns the page and starts to read in a mean voice)) “What’s in your lunch?” |
| 36 | Ss: | ((Expressing surprise at the tone of the HRTs’ voice)) eh? |
| 37 38 | HRT: | ((HRT translates into Japanese in a mean voice)) <i>Omae no bentou, sore ha nan da!?</i> |
| 39 | Ss: | ((Loudly and again expressing surprise)) eeehhhhh? |
| 40 | S1: | ((Talking to the Frank brother)) No, what’s in YOUR lunch? |
| 41 | S2: | ((Talking to the Frank brother)) Your lunch is stranger! |
| 42 | HRT: | “It’s green. It’s seaweed!” <i>Nande midori no kaisou wo tabeteirunda?</i> |
| 43 | S3: | ((Talking to the Frank brother)) Hey, your food is worse! |
| 44 | S4: | ((Talking to the Frank brother)) Your lunch is bad! |

What is striking about the transcripts for pilot lesson 2 is that students’ reactions to the reading are more frequent and spirited compared to pilot lesson 1. The most emotional reactions from students can be seen in lines 39, 40, 41, 43, and 44. These reactions occur after the HRT has read the text in Japanese. When the same scene was read in pilot lesson 1 students spent time trying to work out the meaning of what the Frank brother said. In pilot lesson 2, however, the HRT’s translations exempted students from this effort. This could

be one reason why students in pilot lesson 2 showed more immediate expression of emotion towards the story.

We can see in the students’ answering to the Frank brother’s taunts that they were responding to him as if they themselves were in the scene being taunted. It is the author’s belief that this kind of experience is also a cross-cultural learning experience. As mentioned earlier, young children learn about a foreign culture from experiencing it rather than being lectured about it. In pilot lesson 2, the students are looking at a U.S. school through the eyes of Yoko and are as surprised as her that her peers would tease her for eating sushi. Thus, they learn that in other countries children might look at sushi differently than they do.

Conclusions on selecting and using picture books

This paper has attempted to elucidate criteria for English picture books that will work in the Japanese elementary school classroom and highlight some of the different ways that they can be used. It was surmised that students were interested in *Yoko* because they could sympathize with main character, the issues in the book were relevant for them, and the topic of food was intrinsically interesting to them. Furthermore, the language of *Yoko* was concise, contained many words related to food, and authentic. Thus, in Transcript 1, students were able to guess the meaning of the words, listen to authentic English, and follow the story.

This paper has shown three ways in which *Yoko* was used in CCUP: (a) to provide children with a rich literary experience, (b) to encourage the use of English learning strategies, and (c) to learn about a different culture. The three

types of uses of *Yoko* by no way comprise a comprehensive taxonomy of the way in which an English picture book can be utilized. What is notable about this study is that the two pilot lessons demonstrated the diversity of ways an English picture book can be used even when the teachers and students have minimal experience teaching or learning the language.

I would like to end this paper by discussing the possible role of English picture books in elementary school English activities. In its recent plans for reforms of Japanese elementary school education, the Ministry of Education, Sports, Science, and Culture proposed to make English activities compulsory for all primary schools and to decrease the number of hours for the Period for Integrative Study. It is my belief that English picture books are also appropriate for English activities in Japanese elementary schools because they encourage children to use a variety of strategies to understand authentic language. In these pilot lessons, the teachers did not explicitly plan on encouraging the use of English learning strategies. For example, the HRT in pilot lesson 1 planned on using the book to teach about culture while the HRT in pilot lesson 2 planned on using the book to provide children with an enjoyable experience and teach about culture. Nevertheless, this paper showed that in both lessons students did use English learning strategies. A possible implication of this is that if an appropriate English picture book is chosen for and presented well to a group of elementary school-aged children, it can develop into a means of learning about English for the learners organically. This study shows two possible reasons for this: (a) certain words will pique children's curiosity and they will naturally try to

learn their meaning (see lines 18 – 32 in Transcript 2) and (b) children will naturally use a variety of English listening strategies to understand a story they are interested in (see lines 7 – 13 in Transcript 1). From talking to colleagues and attending conferences, I have frequently heard the fear that the grammar-translation method will accompany compulsory English activities in elementary schools and encourage *eigogirai* or the “dislike of English.” I believe that using English picture books can encourage the “liking of English.”

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