

Teaching English to Non-Native Primary Learners Through Picture Books

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Abstract

Over the past decades, language learning as one of the tools to holistically develop students in an ever-changing world, particularly with emphasis on communication, has been a key policy in East and Southeast Asia. Throughout the region, English is the major 'foreign' language taught, and its inclusion in primary schools' curricula is often at the expense of local languages (Coleman 2010; Hadisantosa 2010; Kirkpatrick and Liddicoat 2017). Although Japan is one of the few exceptional countries that is worried about endangerment of the national language, Japanese has in fact been strongly supported and English is facing more issues. However, Japan is implementing English at the primary school level in 2020, and this paper recommends the use of picture books or literature in the newly implemented English classroom focusing on two merits: concentration and interest. Young learners have a short span of concentration or dedication to perform tasks, with the span reducing with decrease in the learner's age. Aibara and Furuichi (2012) revealed that the average duration for which 10- to 12-year-old children can concentrate is 13 to 16 minutes depending on the content. In order to enhance their interest in learning, picture books should match their concentration span. Carefully selected picture books can allure young learners to pay more attention to the contents, leading to the acquisition of not only language skills but also cultural knowledge. The background culture of the target language will broaden the perspective of learners, making the use of picture books more effective.

Keywords: TEYL, reading and writing, picture books, elementary school learners

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Introduction

English as a second or an additional language is widely taught at elementary stage or even earlier at preschool age worldwide. Pedagogy, materials, and teacher training are some of the many issues associated with teaching English to young learners (hereafter TEYL), which is a controversial topic, particularly with potential change for communicative use in Asian countries. Su (2017) noted that governments in Asian countries attributed the problem to dominant grammar-translation teaching method in regions. When change is suggested, the first challenge that communicative language teaching encounters is its possibility of implementation, due to mainly unprepared or underprepared teachers, that occurs not only in Asia but also elsewhere. Additionally, as Paul (2003) mentioned, many of the tried-and-tested techniques and multitude of information primarily target children who use Roman alphabet in their native languages, or who are in a significantly different psychological climate than Asian children. Paul (ibid.) indicated that in the 2010s, the communicative or child-centred method implemented in Asian countries was heavily influenced by approaches designed for North America or Europe. Many educational reforms led by government policy have occurred in the region since then, including some cases at the expense of the native language.

The writer has long been searching for better teaching methods for Asian children, particularly for Japanese learners, and this study investigates the use of picture books in TEYL to generate interest and increase motivation and proposes a potential method for using picture books.

Background

The study background involves two important factors: one for specific Japanese educational condition in the context of TEYL and the background of the pedagogy of using picture books in TEYL.

Despite the prevalent key policy of English as the major foreign language and communication tool in East and Southeast Asia, Japan has been an exception. As of 2017, English as a major foreign language and as a formal school subject*¹ has been taught but at the secondary school stage, which is quite late according to global standards. However, the country had a history of TEYL in the past: in 1886, English began to be taught at public elementary school (although these schools were co-eds, mostly boys attended) as an “additional subject” equivalent to electives in the modern system. (Erikawa 2006) This TEYL included alternating highly flourishing and stagnant periods and lasted until the Second World War when English became the ‘enemy’ language. Immediately after the war, English education began at secondary school, and the system has remained intact to this day with several minor reforms. The Ministry of Education (MEXT) has in 2017 declared that English should ‘aim to improve the quality of basic English education, and adequately prepare school children to be ready for middle school, then to higher education. Ultimately make graduates globally competitive in English communication’.

New education reform will implement English as a formal subject in Years 5 and 6 from 2020 onwards, and faces several potential issues including pedagogy, materials, and up-skills training seminars for the teachers. The most challenging issue is perhaps

teacher development, as most elementary school teachers do not speak English and they have insufficient language knowledge, teaching training, and teaching skills.

The other background-related factor concerns the pedagogy of using picture books.

Picture books in this context do not refer to picture dictionaries or books of pictures.

The implication here is that a book has a story, however simple, and accompanying pictures or illustrations. As Bourke (2006.280) has noted, ‘children live in a world of fantasy and make-believe’. A pedagogy called CLE for Concentrated Language Encounter — term adapted from Courtney B. Cazden’s *Child Language and Education* in 1972 — is noteworthy in this context. It was first intended to suggest children’s engagement with activities or task, and with financial support over the years from the Rotary International Literacy Resource Group*², it achieved success in disadvantaged communities in Thailand, the Philippines, and South Africa. It then worked primarily as a framework for developing literacy to teach English. The writer and a small group of delegates from educational institutions went to Manila in 2013 to observe the possibility of implementation of the framework to TEYL in Japan. The CLE consists of five stages, each of which is divided into five phases, starting from Stage 1, Phase 1 and progressing to Phase 2, etc. We observed all phases and stages in several schools and were quite impressed with its effectiveness for Filipino children. However, we were also compelled to acknowledge the fundamental differences between the Philippines and Japan in terms of several elements including socio-linguistic background and cultural factors. The teachers were well trained CLE certified instructors, well supplied with knowledge and skills based on fluent use of the target language. Although the Philippines has multiple native tongues and the national language was set as Tagalog, all of them used the Roman alphabet. In addition, the country has a particularly strong relationship with the U.S., and income-generating opportunities using English were very high. We unanimously concluded that it was not possible to introduce CLE to the Japanese system, primarily due to the paucity of able instructors and opportunities of training them. However, the method itself should not be ignored, particularly because its potential is probably limitless depending on how it is used, sustained, or evolved. Therefore, this current study proposes the use of picture books in TEYL using pedagogy inspired by CLE.

Using Picture Books in TEYL

Two main factors encourage using picture books in TEYL. The first is the duration of reading picture books. The length of class periods in public elementary school is 45 mins in Japan. It is commonly acknowledged that younger children have a shorter span of concentration, and it is not easy to retain children’s focus on one thing. To clarify the duration of children’s concentration, Aibara and Sugawara et al. (2012) demonstrated the effectiveness of retaining the concentration of 10- to 12-year-old children with picture books. Aibara and Furuichi (2013) conducted experiments*³ on 4-year-olds with digital picture books. They found that children concentrated for 15 minutes and 09 seconds. Usually, any picture book that parents, teachers, or librarians choose for mandatory or recreational reading is completed in a duration ranging from a few to five minutes if read loud. This means that if a picture book is used as ELT material, a teacher can use the 15 minutes concentration span for finishing a story with instruction as one module during a class and still have time to apply other

pedagogy in the class.

Matching children's concentration span with the time taken to finish reading a picture book will reduce the mismatches between teaching and learning

The second factor is stimulating interest in learning. Using pictures or picture books in study subjects is not a new phenomenon. Subjects other than foreign language, such as arithmetic, social science, and even music use picture clips or illustrations, as the visuals are naturally suited to the cognitive development of children. Piaget's 'concrete operational stage' indicates the age range that fits the elementary school age. The implication is that children understand and acquire concepts attached to concrete ideas, for which stories and pictures are an effective tool. The suitability of teaching material for their cognitive development stimulates children's interest in 'knowing'.

In Japan, when elementary Year 3 children start learning English, a variety of pictures should be used as teaching materials, and story books with pictures can also enlighten learners' perspectives.

Picture books in TEYL using the CLE method

The concept of CLE involves two kinds of programs: text-based and activity-based. The text-based is a basic program involving using a picture book with texts. It is intended to develop abilities of expression, self-confidence, tolerance to different opinions, and interest retention.

The major characteristics of CLE are scaffolding and spiral learning.

Scaffolding aims to help and guide learners with a variety of support systems, aiming to allow learners take one step, however small, forward. As Krashen's *i+1* implies, by 'directing attention on in remembering the whole task and goals on behalf of the learner, the teacher is doing what children are not yet able to do for themselves' (Cameron 2001: 9). Particularly in primary learners' classrooms, a teacher may demonstrate and show a model, and/or as Walker and Rattanavich et al. (1992) suggest, supply still or moving pictures, audio recordings, dramatization, or hands-on experimental activities, and remind, encourage, and coach learners. Some distinct scaffolding examples include using questions, filling the gap by continuing the sentence a learner cannot finish, and providing adequate and ample encouragement.

In spiral learning, as a phase progresses, a lesson starts with the revision of previous learning. For instance, at Stage 1, the same starter book is used repeatedly throughout the same five phases, and new learning is based on the revision, so that the class is conducted using replication and new production. This makes the learning easier for less confident learners.

Stage 1 targets elementary school grades/Years 1 and 2, Stage 2 targets Grades 3 and 4, and Stage 3 does so for Grades 5 and 6. However, the curriculum should reflect the individual situation. When Year 3 pupils start learning English as a foreign language, they should start from Stage 1 Phase 1, but the starter book should be carefully selected to suit their cognitive development and facilitate acquisition.

CLE has set objectives, subject matter and procedure in each stage and phase.

The following is an example teaching plan based on the data collected from observing classes with the teachers' permission.*⁴

STAGE 1: Objectives		STAGE 2: Objectives	
Phase 1 Shared reading of the Starter Book	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Associate pictures with the printed symbols. 2. Answer wh-questions. 	Phase 1 Analyzing the starter book	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use past form of the verb. 2. Sequence the events. 3. Read orally a story with correct pronunciation, stress, and rhythm. 4. Write legibly and neatly observing neat letter forms, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.
Phase 2 Reviewing the story	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sequence events as they happened in the story. 2. Retell the story through the pictures. 3. Associate pictures with the printed symbols. 	Phase 2 Linking the text to personal experience	
Phase 3 Negotiating a group text	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Answer questions about heard story. 2. Answer wh-questions. 	Phase 3. Negotiating the new text	
Phase 4 Making a Big Book	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Illustrate story in a "Big Book". 2. Use correct capitalization in writing sentences. 	Phase 4. Critically analyzing the new text	
Phase 5 Activities in conjunction with games	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read sentences in the Big Book. 2. Recognize words in the BB. 3. Write words in the BB. 	Phase 5 Language activities and elaboration	

As this proposal focuses on using picture books in the EFL context, teachers unfamiliar to CLE may find Stage 1 easier to approach. Phase by phase pattern models are presented below along with a discussion of pedagogical strategies.

Stage 1, Phase 1 Shared reading of the starter book

- Sing several songs
- Sit on the floor huddled together
- Guess a story
- See pictures, tell the story page by page
- Actual reading
- Recite the story

The songs can be nursery rhymes, TPR songs, or even popular songs chosen by the class teacher who is familiar with the learners. It is suggested that learners huddle together sitting on the floor, as it provides them an opportunity to be aware that

'English is different' from other study subjects that are highly likely to be teacher-centred requiring stay-on-the desk behaviour in Japan or in other Asian countries. This alone may instil motivation in learners. Depending on the class size, learners can stay on the floor, more closely gathered, making it easier to interact with the teacher or with classmates. The teacher then presents the starter book, preferably a large-sized book that can open flat on a bookstand. The teacher, thus freed from holding the book, can pay attention to the learners more closely. The first step is NOT to begin reading, but asking questions about the cover, colour, pictures, and anything else that learners can see and notice. The teacher then encourages them to guess the story by flipping the pages or showing pictures. The pre-reading objective is to allow learners to guess and speak out—even a single word's utterance is encouraged. For very elementary learners, the use of mother tongue to describe the guess is tolerated. After the teacher's model reading, as the starter book has only few sentences, learners can repeat the story in chorus, in groups, or individually as often as their interest is retained. This phase can be applied to the entire class duration of 45 minutes or can be adapted to any length of time according to the classroom situation.

At this stage, the stress-free classroom environment and use of mother tongue to develop schema are examples of scaffolding.

In the Philippines, *Lito's Pet* was used as the started book, and it has the following story:

Lito has a pet frog.
He put the frog into the jar.
He jumps out of the jar.
Lito runs after the frog.
The frog jumps into the pond.
Lito cries.

Each line corresponds to a flat face of two open pages with simple pictures. One sentence in each of the two open pages provides learners a clear view of what is happening, using a visual cue of sounds, words, and meaning. Every time the teacher flips the page, a new sentence appears along with the new picture, imparting a sense of anticipation to the learners.

This story also contains cultural references such as a frog as a pet or the name of the boy, which can be adjusted according to the teachers' discretion.

Stage 1 Phase 2 Reviewing the story

Retell the story from memory Reading of the story (by learners) Retell the story to match pictures Match pictures and texts Arrange the pictures/texts in order Revise reading

The aim of this phase is to allow the learners to absorb the meaning of the text by recalling and retelling the story. Some learners may recite the story from memory, some might utter a single word, and others may paraphrase in mother tongue. All

these responses should be encouraged, as it is important to keep the learners attentive and mentally active. It might not be possible to implement the reading activity in Japan or in other Asian nations; however, it is likely that learners ‘pretend’ to read while they are reciting from memory. Using flashcards to match the pictures may promote learners’ cognitive development while reading. The teaching materials needed at this phase are the book; singled out pictures; and texts cards, preferably with magnet at the back of each card.

Some of the observed techniques used by the teacher were control of speed and rhythm in instructing the class and reading the book, along with a variety of ‘clapping’ TPR activities. When learners’ began to lose attention, she switched from the lesson to the ‘clapping’ activity which instantly changed the mood, drew learners to renewed interest in the lesson, and retained their concentration for the entire 40 minutes – well over the 15 minutes average concentration span.

Stage 1, Phase 3 Negotiating a group text

Recall the story in sequence

Sentence writing

Negotiation of a story to make a Small Book

The objective of this stage is transforming the oral content into the written form. Additionally, by negotiating ideas for a new book/story in a group, each learner creates their own Small Book. The priority is task completion.

By retelling the story sentence by sentence, learners progress to the wording activity. At this stage, learners may make both grammatical and spelling mistakes, and the teacher reads out the correct form several times to promote awareness, followed by transcribing. Learners have sets of written sentences on large separate sheets of paper. Later, they can order the sentences on the blackboard. Creating a new story is then negotiated: what pet to be instead of the frog, the colour, the name, what it likes (to do) etc. All the learners must state their preferences; if some are reticent or shy to speak in class, the teacher prompts them gently. Once the details of the new book are decided, learners form a group and work on drawing pictures in accordance with writing on adequate paper. The pages are later stapled, and a simple small book is created. In this phase, the three tasks of recalling, writing, and making a small book are almost equally divided into 15-minute slots. For this task, the concentration of the class needs to effectively controlled.

The finished works varied in completion: - 5 legged or 3 legged dog, stick-legged, or cat-like dog; excluding grammatical errors, all other details should be tolerated and admired.

In the Philippines, to prevent learners from chatting with classmates, background music from PC in medium-low volume was applied as a settler. If applied in Japan, depending on the competence of learners’ writing speed and ability, the teacher can pin text sentences on the blackboard for copying. Additionally, instead of using music, cooperation within a group can be encouraged.

Stage 1, Phase 4 Making a Big Book

Review of the story

Making of a Big Book - match pictures and texts, the size, the pages etc.

Number and format pages

Divide the class into groups to work on 1 page per group

Arrange the made-up pages and assemble

The objective of this phase is to share ideas with classmates, promoting learners' ability to work in a group and imparting a sense of achievement on completing the shared work. All the details of the book making, such as the size of the book, the number of pages, and the format, are topics of class discussion in English. However, it can be performed in mother tongue with interspersed English. Additionally, the first Big Book can be teacher-centred, so that learners understand the process, following which learner-centred books can be used.

Stage 1, Phase 5 Activities in conjunction with games

Read the covered word and the whole sentence

Compete the speed and accuracy in completing sentences in 2 groups

Arrange letters to form a correct word

Find words in a puzzle

Games refer to languages games, and the objective at this phase is reading the Big Book with ease using minimum prompting in chorus. Learners are led to pay attention to the entire structure of texts, be aware of sentences and words, and the overall writing. Letters and phonographic correspondence should ideally be the focus of their learning. The learners can 'explore certain aspects of a certain topic and the language associated with it' (Bourke 2006: 282). However, the level of enjoyment is also vital for TEYL, so once the language games are completed and acquisition is confirmed, a role play or TPR reproduction of the story can be enjoyed.

Conclusion

Using picture books is proposed as one of the major considerations to promote second language acquisition for young learners in communicative environment. The merits of the picture books are that visuals assist young learners first to look and complement the meaning of an unknown story when reading. The usual length of ready-made and customized picture books should suit the concentration time span of young learners.

In addition, another benefit of using picture books in TEYL is that it is possible to foster understanding of cultural heritages and differences by blending cultural factors in stories and pictures. Elements from different cultures will permeate children's perception easily without prejudice. As Bourke (2006. 280) notes, 'children live in a world of... dragons and monsters, talking animals, and alien beings'. Different cultures can blend in their imagination if not cognitively controlled.

Japan is currently in the middle of education reform that will be carried out from 2020 onwards. One controversial and challenging issue among many is the compulsory implementation of English language from the 3rd grade in elementary school. Teacher development or up-skill training for teachers may not be sufficient; syllabus may be prescriptive and uni-directional to meet National Course of Study requirements; and

in the transitional period prior to 2020, schools are facing issues in allocating extra hour/s in the tightly scheduled school time-tables. As Nunun (qtd. Bourke, 2006. 280) has noted, 'learning is mutually constructed as a collaborative experience between teachers and learners', and picture books can benefit both teachers and learners*⁵ with the proposed model pedagogy of CLE.

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Notes

1. Japan has its TEYL at elementary school introduced in 2011, however, the class is treated as an 'activity' for year 5 & 6, 1 class/week, totaling 35 hours/year. Also the activity does not specify English as the target language, which means technically any foreign language can be used.
2. In the Philippines it had partnership with the Department of Education and succeeded in producing substantial teacher manuals as well as website for resources. (www.CLE.ph)
3. The purpose of the study is to find effective ways of learning with the focus on concentration from pedagogy, andragogy to gerogogy. For the young ones they made a digital picture book MU³ PictureBook (MU3-PB) and conducted experiments on 4 year olds accompanied by their mothers. The comparison between using MU3-PB and iPad-PB was also performed, and showed children show longer concentration on MU3-PB than iPad.
4. Data collected at following schools: Stage 1, phases 1-5 at Mandaluyong Elementary School, Mandaluyong City, Manila. Stage 2, phases 1-5 at Tangos Elementary School, Navotas City, Manila. Courtesy of Rotary clubs of Mandaluyong and North Bay East respectively, Dr. Florietta M. Quijano, and Ms. Ruby E. Baniqued. In 2013, the website www.cle.ph was an open source and supplying teachers manual for all stages, however, as of 2017 the site seems to have been cancelled.
5. Book suggestions as a Starter Books for Japanese schools. At lower graders, pattern books such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See* by Bill Martin, Jr., *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell, and *Ten Little Ladybugs* by Melanie Gerth, Kinugasa (2013.90) recommends *White Rabbit's Colour Book* by Alan Baker, *Quick as a Cricket* by Audrey Wood, and classic tale of *Three Billy-Goats*.

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