

The LLL SIG Newsletter

Atsuko Kosaka lectures at Aichi University. In this article, she expands upon her fascinating segment of the LLL-SIG Forum, which she delivered at JALT 2012 in Hamamatsu, on October 13th of this year.

A Reading Workshop: The teacher as a life-long reader and mentor, and students as fellow readers

-- Atsuko Kosaka

“What a difference it makes when a child searches the world for science fiction books by the truly great science fiction writers rather than reading *any* purple-dot book.”

-- Lucy McCormick Calkins (2001, 390)

A student in an EFL reading workshop class said in Japanese while returning *Marvin Redpost: Alone in His Teacher's House* (Sachar, 1994), “This book was good, easy to read and moving. I was lost in the story, wondering what would happen next, and the reading time went very quickly. I experienced that I can read an English book if I like the story.” The student noted, in Japanese, in his reading record, “I would like to continue to read like this even after completing this course.” What he would like to do is exactly what the teacher wants him to do, continuing to read and becoming a life-long reader of English.

While talking with that student, the teacher quickly thought about other titles by the same author and mentioned them to him. At the same time she wondered what books to order next for the classroom library, recalling a recent inquiry from another student, who had asked if there were more books by Simon James. Affirming the second student's eagerness to read more books by her favorite author, the teacher had to tell her that there were only three of his books in the classroom, and recommended a few other authors whom she might like to read.

1. Book Choice and Literacy Talks among Readers

The introduction above describes recent conversations between the teacher and students in an EFL reading workshop classroom, where students often display an eagerness to read. Important in supporting this positive attitude toward reading are choices that both the teacher and students have and literacy talks between and among them. The teacher selects many texts (or parts of texts), each of which she hopes will be appropriate for highlighting particular elements of reading. These include introducing new books and new genres, responding to books, and utilizing reading strategies that proficient readers use.

The students select what to read most of the time, depending upon their preferences, interests, and language proficiency. Routman (2003, 97) argues that reading satisfaction starts with choice and reading competence is closely tied to the amount of time children read on their own. Thus the teacher explicitly instructs students how to select books (and when to abandon books if necessary). She shares her reading territories and talks about her reading life (Atwell 1998, 133-139), or uses interactive read-aloud and shared reading to introduce new genres (Collins 2008, 105). She may also make a class list of “Why Readers Abandon Books” (Fountas and Pinnell 2001, 149) or of “Criteria for Choosing Books to Read” (Serafini 2001, 64). The classroom library is arranged for purposeful book choices for students (Calkins 2001, 36-38). Books in the EFL classroom above are partly organized by reading levels and partly by themes, genres, authors, and other categories. The teacher also guides students in how to recommend books to each other.

The teacher and students not only recommend books but also discuss books that other readers have read. As Atwell (1988, 40) points out, “Literary talk with a teacher and peers is crucial to kids’ development as readers,” and the teacher responds to and leads her students (Atwell 1998, 47). Calkins (2001, 225-247) introduces ways of teaching pre-collegiate students how to discuss books, including “talking to *develop* rather than to report on ideas” and “keeping book talks rooted in the text.” She (Calkins 2001, 395-427) also provides details about book clubs.

Choosing books to read, recommending books to others, and discussing books with each other are not new to our real reading lives. However, these are often lacking in EFL reading classrooms. A reading workshop carefully creates a context for infusing what readers do in their authentic reading into the classroom so that students can grow as readers. Allen (2009, 66) discusses Benson’s gradual release model, which explains a process of students becoming independent: from “aloud (mentor and models)” to “along (fellowship)” to “alone (independence).” The teacher is a reader and a mentor, and fellow students are fellow readers.

2. A Framework for a Reading Workshop

The reading workshop often has three components: mini-lesson, reading time, and share time. These are often parallel to a writing workshop, as two leading figures in reading workshop, Nancie Atwell and Lucy McCormick Calkins, come from a writing workshop background (Atwell 1998, 35-36; Calkins 2001, 66). Most reading workshop classrooms start with a mini-lesson, which is a short whole class meeting in which the teacher discusses what she hopes students will use in their independent reading life (Calkins 2001, 43).

Both the writing workshop and the reading workshop have developed in the context of L1 literacy education. This framework, however, is easily adopted in EFL reading. Many teaching techniques, such as a teacher’s sharing her reading life, thinking aloud as a mentor reader, and interactive read aloud between the teacher and students, are also useful in EFL reading. An EFL teacher, however, needs to add issues related to reading English as a foreign language. For example, good topics for mini-lessons are when and

how to use dictionaries and other word search tools. In addition, reading strategies of many Japanese students are often underdeveloped when they read in English. They are accustomed to decoding and identifying words, and have little experience in responding to the text based upon solid comprehension. They are not skilled at flexibly reading a text differently depending upon the purposes of reading, either. These skills frequently are topics of mini-lessons, too.

After a mini-lesson, students begin reading independently or sometimes in a small group. The teacher moves among students and confers with them individually, in their partnerships, or in small groups (Calkins 2001, 43). In an EFL reading workshop, students frequently show the teacher one word or one phrase that they do not understand, and expect the teacher to give them an answer. Instead of offering answers, the teacher may encourage the students to develop ways to solve the problems. As Calkins (2001, 102) argues, “[W]e *cannot* give up on the belief that conferring with individual readers can lift them to new levels in the reading they do tomorrow.” During conferences, topics covered by mini-lessons are also reinforced for those who are still learning.

The reading workshop class ends with share time. Some educators call this “reflecting time” in which “evaluating strengths and thinking about growth areas, alongside fellow readers, transpires in reflecting” (Allen 2009, 84). It is sometimes difficult to have share time when everyone is engaged in different tasks.

3. Challenges for an EFL Reading Workshop

Atwell points out that the priorities of the secondary literature program are discipline, accuracy, tradition, and mastery, and the center of the curriculum is Great Works of Literature (Atwell 1998, 30). She (Atwell 1998 30) states that, after conducting a reading workshop, the priorities become pleasure, fluency, involvement, insight, appreciation, and initiative, and the center is reader’s responses. An EFL reading workshop teacher faces several challenges when she attempts to shift the priorities of the class from traditional reading instruction to growing readers in a reading workshop.

A frequent challenge lies in book availability. It is not easy to have a good classroom library in terms of space, budget, and selection. In addition, there is often a gap between language proficiency and intellectual development of students. There is no simple solution. Each teacher needs to find his or her best way, looking for possible space and budgets from the school, becoming familiar with various sources including Internet sites, and searching for accessible, yet intellectually challenging texts for students. Kosaka (2012, 59) suggests that a teacher creates “contexts where students can read books that are not intellectually challenging from different angles, such as critically examining children’s literature as a reviewer or looking at a series of books on the same theme or at books by the same author and making this an intellectually challenging author study project.”

Other challenges include class sizes and curriculum constraints. It is not realistic to conduct a successful

reading workshop with fifty students in the class, where the teacher is expected to use an assigned textbook. Most likely, the teacher cannot offer enough conferences to individual students. Further, it is not easy to observe each student's eagerness to read more if everyone is reading the same text at the same pace. Starting a reading workshop with a manageable class size is a good starting point. Or, the teacher can use the concept of the reading workshop to critically examine her teaching. For example, she can ask herself whether or not she is encouraging students to become more independent readers by gradually releasing responsibility to the students, or whether or not she is teaching something students can use in their independent reading. She can also see if there is any opportunity to add texts of her choice to the assigned textbook, such as one poem per lesson, or if there is any space for assignments in which students can work on texts of their choice.

Probably the best challenge lies in the fact that the reading workshop requires the teacher to continue to grow as a reader together with students. Atwell (2003, 67) writes, "An important role of the reading teacher—the most important work, according to my students—is to become so intimate with good books that we bring life, with our voices, to the tattered spines that line the shelves of our libraries. We make it even more likely that kids will find books they love when students, too, have opportunities to inform their classmates about the titles that are too good to miss." Continuing to find and read good books leads to becoming life-long readers.

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