

## **Flowing toward solutions: literature listening and L2 literacy**

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### **Abstract**

University students in Japan often admit during self-introductions in reading classes that they don't like to read, in English or even in Japanese. Getting to fluent, unimpeded reading for pleasure in English is undeniably a challenge but can be surmountable. Especially since the beginning of the 2000s, increasingly sophisticated research on acquisition of reading L1 and L2 has brought new understandings of what is happening in the brains of readers. We can incorporate these findings into our support of our learners, developing effective scaffolding to encourage their success in bridging the gap from "decoding text" to fluent enjoyment of authentic reading. Audiobooks paired with books can decrease intimidation and increase time spent with the language as well as facilitate skilled reading. This article touches on the challenges, introduces some of the research, and shares a series of class projects and evaluations from learners in the process of gaining reading fluency.

Many children tell us that learning to read is hard, and if the first language is English, the telling will be vehement. Some second language readers of English work their way up to a dry plateau of slow, painful, and rarely-accurate sounding out, and their desire to read perishes there. Why are learners around the world faced then with textbooks parched of interest, instead of drawing from intrinsic human abilities and desire for stories?

Stories are hardwired into humans; telling stories aloud, and then with literacy, in print as well (Boyd, 2009; Cron, 2012). Judge (2012) writes: "Storytelling is part of our makeup as human beings. It is one of our oldest and most important forms of communication" (Judge, 2012, p. 13). The intrinsically social nature of stories offers connections to learning and Dornyei and

Murphey (2003, p. 4) suggest that learning is best done with human social nature in mind. The value of parents reading to their children is well established (Clark, 2007; Duursma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008; OECD, 2002), and for L2 English learners, stories are engaging, and if shared socially, all the more so. Iida (2013) provides a valuable overview of current empirical research on the positive roles literature plays in the L2 classroom, citing studies that show benefits across the spectrum of L2 learning targets, and concluding that literature helps “develop L2 linguistic knowledge and language awareness, communicative competence, cultural knowledge of the target language, critical thinking skills...motivation, and...emotional engagement” (Iida, 2013, p. 9). Bibby (2012) also writes that teachers choosing authentic literature for their learners may be offering students “context” (Bibby, 2012, p. 7) with which to engage with their L2 when the language is largely absent outside the classroom.

Despite literature’s demonstrable role in EFL learning, there seems to be sparse research on oral literature’s possibilities for EFL learners, even though oral storytelling could be considered the original form of literature, and certainly endured as the primary method of sharing stories until literacy became widespread, and books became both affordable and available in ordinary society (Chartier, 2002, pp. 136-138; Lai-ming, 2008). Research specifically on the potential of audiobook-listening to support fluent L2 reading development and literature enjoyment also seems sparse, but closely relevant published research from Taiwan is showing extremely encouraging results in listening fluency and comprehension gains from experiments pairing extensive listening and reading (Chang, 2009, 2011; Chang & Millett, 2014).

In this article I would like to make a case for taking a proactive approach to helping learners at a particular point of L2 reading: learners who are able to read by visually decoding, but are not yet able to enjoy reading fluently in their L2. Oral literature offers an accessible bridge between our hardwired, innate brain skills (Wolf, 2008, Chapter 1) and reading, and can provide a *critical mass* of input in listening to support development of fluent reading (Isozaki, 2014b). Providing this bridge is particularly crucial when the target L2 is not prevalent in the learners’ surrounding environment (Stephens, 2011a; Walter, 2008).

### **Research**

Writing on the history and neuroscience of reading in *Proust and the Squid*, Wolf (2008) explores the development (and challenges) of humans learning to read: while listening

and speaking are innate in the healthy brain, reading and writing are wired up later – these skills are not in our genes (Wolf, 2008, pp. 10-11). Once the connections for smooth reading are built, and information is flowing without conscious effort, it's easy to forget the process (Wolf, 2008, p. 114), but new findings from many quarters are now teasing out exactly what happens in the brain as these processes get wired and activated (Wolf, 2008, Chapters 5, 6).

For L1 English reading, the research increasingly points to benefits for reading skills and comprehension from developing a strengthened sound-sense of the language at many levels. In their 1990 publication of *Phonological Awareness and Learning to Read*, Goswami and Bryant assert that “English is a capricious orthography” (Goswami & Bryant, 1990, p. 26) and explain that though readers depend partly on correspondences between written letters and their typically assigned sounds, the “English script is too unpredictable ... we cannot read by simply translating ... individual letters into sounds” (Goswami & Bryant, 1990, p. 30). Comparing the challenges of learning to read in English to learning to read in other languages, Goswami, with Ziegler, notes again that English is “exceptionally inconsistent” due to the difficulties it poses for new readers in matching letters to sounds, and vice-versa as well (Ziegler & Goswami, 2006, p. 430). Wolf, in comparing English to German, Finnish, and Italian, makes a similar point (Wolf, 2008, p. 152), as do Perfetti and Dunlap in comparing sixteen languages including Welsh, Korean, Lao, and Khmer (2008, pp. 18-19).

Ashby (2006), in an L1 English reading experiment, tracked the eye movements of university students reading silently and fluently, deducing that their reading has prosody. Good readers are *mentally hearing* syllables and stress as part of processing for comprehension while reading, as well as the letter-sound correspondences of phonological awareness (Ashby, 2006, pp. 328, 331). Whalley and Hansen (2006), in an L1 reading experiment with children of ages eight to ten, experimented to see how awareness of stress and rhythm help distinguish meanings and provide “chunking” for thought groups and “highlighting” of information to build comprehension (Whalley and Hansen, 2006, pp. 288-290). They also found evidence that, in addition to phonological awareness, English reading fluency development requires prosodic sensitivity (Whalley & Hansen, 2006, p. 297). They point out that there is a “paucity of prosodic information provided in written [English] language” (Whalley & Hansen, 2006, p. 291) and that “the reader must supply the prosody intended by the writer, which is only sparsely captured by

punctuation, to understand fully the context of the passage and its intended message” (Whalley & Hansen, 2006, p. 299).

Catherine Walter’s (2008) seminal research on verbal working memory and the “phonological loop” examines the process in which input, both heard *and read* from text, is stored briefly *in audio form* in working memory, to find a sound-match in long-term memory, enabling comprehension (Walter, 2008, pp. 458-459). L2 learners who cannot comprehend well while reading – who are not fluent L2 readers yet – are not getting reliable, accurate, fast sound-matches between their working memory and long term memory, and that time lag inhibits comprehension (Walter, 2008, pp. 458-459). Walter therefore advocates that learners build up their L2 memory storage by getting more input and practice with the target language’s sounds (phonemes and syllables), stress, and vocabulary. Among other recommendations, she suggests having students “read books at their level while listening to spoken word CDs” (Walter, 2008, pp. 470-471).

Bringing the research from alphabetical languages closer to the situation faced by learners in Asia acquiring L2 English literacy, research reported in Koda and Zehler: *Learning to Read Across Languages* documents that many languages such as Korean (see Perfetti & Dunlap, above) are reliable for decoding. With English so much less consistent, another layer of unfamiliar challenge is added to efforts toward L2 English literacy acquisition for learners, beyond the matters of, for example, differing scripts. Yet Koda also reports consensus among researchers in every language examined, including across the Asian region, that phonological awareness is key for learning to read in each language and literacy acquired (Koda, p. 224), and that even with Chinese characters the issue may not be the existence or not of phonological activity but the timing of processing; that is, rather than solely visual recognition, the reader mentally hears the characters they are reading but with slightly different timing than in alphabetical language-reading (Wang & Yang, 2008, citing Perfetti et al., p. 139).

Meredith Stephens, in Japan, reminds us that children acquiring L1 English get “exaggerated prosody provided by their caregivers” [e.g., by reading stories aloud], which builds their ability to sort the flow of language into understandable patterns (Stephens, 2011b, pp.70-71). Her reference to “caregivers” suggests substantial time and repetition, factors likely to be crucial for all ages. Stephens also suggests that extensive reading for English learners should be done with audio, especially for learners whose L1 is “distant” from L2 English (2011a).

Considering Steven Pinker's observation regarding the distance between Japanese and English: "Japanese and English are looking-glass versions of each other" (Pinker, 1994, p. 111), Stephens' suggestions for audio to support acquisition of English reading fluency seem especially applicable in Japan. Japanese, when written in either of its two alphabets, katakana or hiragana, does correspond directly to the intended sound of its words, but the overwhelming number of homophones in the language interfere with understanding when texts are produced only in those alphabets. Mixing in adopted Chinese characters (kanji) aids greatly in distinguishing between meanings, but most characters in kanji can be read in multiple ways and these must, thus, be learned by schoolchildren with a great deal of *ondoku*, or repetitive oral practice of target reading passages with feedback and corrections from teachers and parents, to gain competent literacy in Japanese. Writing Japanese with the roman alphabet has not offered a solution either, because additionally to the homophones issue, competing transliterations from Japanese to roman lettering still exist and hamper teaching and learning written language correspondences to intended sound in the roman alphabet as well. The respective orthographic-to-phonemic challenges of both English and Japanese, therefore, make them each strong candidates for listening work providing support for gaining full, enjoyable L1 literacy. Certainly, given the considerable differences between the two languages, audio listening to scaffold reading may help support bridging the distance between them for L2 literacy development (Isozaki, 2014a).

### **Experimental classroom research**

Chang (2011) reports on a two-semester project with high school students, in which seven students using audiobooks paired with graded readers showed notable gains in vocabulary and listening fluency and comprehension compared to a control group. Perhaps equally notable were the gains this experimental group showed in motivation and enthusiasm; in the second semester of the voluntary project the students increased their book-audiobook borrowing rate eighty-one percent, and all participants moved from choosing exclusively graded reader-audiobook sets to borrowing an authentic and challenging ungraded series as well (Chang, 2011, pp. 54-55, 58). Clearly, even for high school EFL learners intimidation can be overcome with encouragement and complementary scaffolding support, to the point of independently choosing and enjoying ungraded literature. In another experiment, this one with college students, Chang (2009) found student feedback on combining listening and reading to a story to be, in the

students' own opinions: "interesting," with the majority reporting that they were able to pay attention better, that their comprehension was high, and that the stories were "just right" in challenge level, whereas the comparison single-input condition elicited far lower ratings (Chang, 2009, pp. 659-660). Chang emphasizes from her 2011 experimental results that the "key to the success of the RWL [reading while listening] group thus can be attributed to the large quantity of aural input and the support of the written form... which made the input more comprehensible" (Chang, 2011, p. 53).

In a study based in Japan, Brown, Waring and Donkaewbua (2008) mention that an argument for pairing extensive reading with listening is that it may facilitate catching "meaningful sense groups" (Intro, Reading-While-Listening). Student feedback on the three methods experimented with in the study (solely reading, solely listening, or reading and listening together) showed a majority of students (72%) preferred reading and listening together (Brown, Waring & Donkaewbua, 2008, table 15).

### **Integrating the research with practice**

Research published to date seems mainly to have focused on simultaneous listening and reading, and the results have highlighted various important points of reading skills development, or listening comprehension development. There may be some considerations, however, to justify experimentation with complementary approaches for helping learners take the next steps toward fluent reading. First, natural speech rates in English are reported variously, ranging from 111 to over 200 words per minute (Yuan, Liberman & Cieri, 2006). Mental assimilation of words can be slower (Chang, 2011, p. 45- 46) or much faster, and reading speeds also will naturally, during the course of a reading project, be changing. When the speeds of an audio recording, the learner's reading, and the learner's listening comprehension are different, it can be more natural and enjoyable for learners to separate the activities rather than tolerate doing them together, especially through a book of any length.

Unpressured listening can build background familiarity to connect with when later reading the printed text, whether it is phonemic-to-orthographic awareness being developed, as some of the research above seems to suggest, or a learner's sense of the characters and story line, as experienced and reported by some learners: "knowing the general flow of the story, personalities of characters and major events helps ... to visualize the dialogue and become much

more engrossed in the text” (R. Rowland & N. Rowland, personal communication, February 22, 2014).

Psychology of happiness and fulfillment researcher Mihaly Csíkszentmihályi, well-known for using the term flow to describe “a state of heightened focus and immersion” and “stepping into an alternative reality,” (recognizable to any reader engrossed in an involving story), suggests flow can occur when:

...you know that what you need to do is possible to do, even though difficult, and sense of time disappears, you forget yourself, you feel part of something larger. And once the conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake. (Csíkszentmihályi, 2008)

This may be relevant to understanding why some second language English readers enjoying stories report flow experiences, even when they do not understand every word at first. In an interesting case study by Nishino (2007), high school students who had initially been reading graded readers outside their schoolwork to strengthen their L2 English skills chose to read *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Nishino supported the students’ reading project in several helpful ways: by being a participant-observer (Nishino read the same stories), by preparing vocabulary support, and by being physically present and available to the students if questions came up during their reading (Nishino, 2007). The students had also familiarized themselves in multiple ways with the *Harry Potter* series, building strong background knowledge before reading the (then) newly published and untranslated one. One student said, “From seeing the movie and reading three books [in Japanese] from the Harry Potter series ... I can imagine the settings, and I can guess what a person wants to say ... This helps me guess word meanings”(Nishino, 2007). Nishino noticed strong evidence of flow in the students’ reading, with strikingly long periods of absorption (Nishino, 2007, appendix C). One of the participating students commented:

Even if the level of an English book is higher than our reading abilities, we can read it if we have knowledge about the topic. Of course, it depends a lot on the vocabulary level whether the book is accessible or not, but if a topic is familiar to us, we can read a book even if the vocabulary level is a little higher (Nishino 2007).

In a *TED* Talk, Csikszentmihályi says: "...Arousal...is...over-challenged...but you can move into flow fairly easily by just developing a little more skill...[it's] the area where most people learn from, because that's where they're pushed beyond their comfort zone and...*then they develop higher skills*" (Csikszentmihályi, 2008, italics added), strengthening the case made by Nishino in her research observation of flow experiences in learners and her support of learners' choosing challenging, authentic literature for themselves.

### **Some classroom projects and learner feedback**

In a small university in Japan, students in first and second year listening and reading courses explored a number of possibilities for learner-controlled listening and reading with full novels and audiobooks. Below is a brief description of some of the listening-to-reading projects and learner responses. The primary goal of the instructor was to learn if extended interaction with an authentic English novel or memoir and its audiobook through the course of a semester would be a positive experience, and if learners would feel improvements in their English skills. The projects were viewed by the instructor as a collaboration with the students: the overwhelming majority of them had never read a full English novel nor had ever tried listening to an audiobook. Therefore, in asking for the substantial extra effort from students, the instructor frankly explained the research available and the questions that remain unanswered. The students were asked to make self-observations during the project since their observations and comments would be requested at the end, and their experience and advice could be helpful for other learners in the future (Appendix A). The anonymous feedback sheet used by participants had a number of questions, the most critical of those intended to ascertain if a project was, in their view, worthwhile: Would they want to try another book in the future? Also, what changes, if any, had students noticed in their feelings about reading, about listening, and about their English skills in general? (Feedback form: Appendix B).

Initially students borrowed individually on a voluntary, extra-credit basis from the instructor's collection of books and audiobooks; mostly high quality young adult stories such as Newbery award winners, or manageable bestsellers like *Tuesdays With Morrie*. The instructor suggested that students experiment with different combinations of listening and reading and asked for feedback on what worked best for them (see Appendix B). Through two university semesters, 2011-2012, four reading and listening classes were offered the instructor's collection,



and approximately half the twenty members chose to participate in each class. Feedback to the instructor from these participants was highly positive, such as: “Resistance to reading a long story vanished,” “I thought reading in English was a study, but now I enjoy reading in English,” and especially encouraging: “Please let new student to do this project.”

Other researchers have described small group discussions about literature having many benefits; as cited in Iida (2013), a classroom study of “literature circles” by Kim (2004) “showed that literature discussions had the potential to engage students in enjoyable reading, enabled them to practice the target language through active social interactions, and gave them the opportunity to express themselves meaningfully in English” and found that overall, “literature circles ... promoted their L2 communicative competence” (Iida, 2013, p. 7). A number of student comments to this instructor such as, “I want to talk about the books we read in the class and to compare our opinions,” instigated explorations of group work. *Tuesdays With Morrie*, popular in individual borrowing, became a second-year listening class project, with several meetings of approximately five-member “book clubs” discussing the story as it progressed over the course of the semester. Comments from students in feedback showed that all liked the story, and felt that their English skills had improved: “*Tuesdays With Morrie* changed my way of thinking. ‘What’s life?’ ‘What’s love?’ ... There’re so many things to learn!”

Further explorations of combining listening and reading literature projects with small, in-class “book-club” meetings incorporated strategies developed by Chutatip Yumitani (2013), who reported on learner-creation of notebooks with drawings and memos about novels students were reading. In the process of making their “picture books,” her L2 learners are encouraged to “visualize” rather than mentally translate the stories (Yumitani, 2013). During semesters of university English courses, students reading novels such as books from the *Harry Potter* series consolidate their grasp of the stories by this creative artwork integrated with writing, easing confirmation of content and plotlines with their instructor (Yumitani, 2013).

Modeling on Yumitani’s method, first-and second-year students in three semester-long courses were asked to create notebooks to record their impressions and understanding while listening to and reading Ann Brashares’ popular novel, *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. The student notebooks, with their succinct texts and easily understandable drawings, provided tangible visual aids during learners’ “book-club” meetings and visibly improved small group collaboration; the notebooks facilitated naturally in mutual confirmation and for learners’ sharing

of thoughts and feelings about the novel in their discussions. End-of-semester feedback from the eighteen members of the first year class indicated that nine had listened to the audiobook once; the other nine reported listening through from twice to “many” times. All students felt the project had been helpful in improving their general English listening skills, and all students wanted to try another book in the future. Seventeen of the eighteen felt their reading had improved. A typical comment:

I thought I cannot read it, at first. The book is very long and many vocabulary I don't know. But I read the book and listen to CD. I can read the book without any trouble at all. I find reading English book is fun.

This student volunteered also that she had raised her TOEIC score by two hundred points during the semester this project took place. Due certainly to other, concurrent English courses as well, fifteen of this course's members reported strong growth in their scores (Isozaki, 2014b).

A strong majority of the members of the two classes of second year students reported enjoying listening to and reading the novel, feeling improvements in their listening and vocabulary, and wanting to try another book in the future (fourteen of sixteen in one class; fifteen to eighteen out of twenty in the other.) Excerpted from second-year student feedback:

Before I took this reading class, I had never used an audio-book. Also, this was my first time to read a long English novel (except extensive reading books.) Therefore, using “Sisterhood of the traveling pants” [sic] told me that reading and listening at the same time help improving me to deepen my understanding of the novel. Maybe, I can't finish reading the book if there was no CD. I felt that this method is really suited for me.

Another learner shared: “Thanks to ...a project of sisterhood, more and more I love to read them. I feel the change of my attitude to read English book is the biggest. I would like to read more long English books.”

### **Conclusion**

Research in combining listening and reading for EFL learners is recently increasing and particularly, Chang's and Chang and Millet's work has been documenting impressive listening

comprehension gains for learners with paired extensive listening and reading materials in both graded and ungraded literature (Chang, 2009, 2011; Chang & Millett, 2014).

Experimental research focusing especially on reading fluency outcomes, with greater participant numbers than reported here, still needs to be done. The exploratory class projects with literature in combinations of audiobooks and print shared in this article do not yet offer clear answers to questions such as optimal combinations and timing for listening and reading. They do however offer encouragement to continue exploring these questions. In the projects thus far, learner-controlled pacing of listening and reading and open choices between simultaneous and separated listening and reading were at least felt to be beneficial by the participants, according to the high proportions of reported positive experiences and outcomes in learners' comments and written feedback.

One potential drawback to this report is applicability. The university at which these projects took place is noted for highly motivated students, reliable in their efforts both in and outside the classroom. This level of personal and university-wide commitment may not be a situation all university instructors can assume will be present. Exploring similar but less-demanding projects is underway, however, in another setting where English is at the periphery of the curriculum. Students there generally have not had positive experiences in the past with English, but active participation is high and their comments have been positive. This will be the subject of a future paper; at present it is mentioned because it appears that a good story in a manageable presentation of combined listening and reading can also be motivating for previously discouraged English learners.

With the progress in experimental and theoretical research by other researchers cited above and the learner satisfaction regarding self-experienced growth in skills, confidence and pleasure in reading expressed by student-participants in these shared class projects, this instructor hopes to continue and deepen classroom research toward better understanding of how to help L2 English learners become empowered, fluent readers.

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#### Author Note

Literature; *stories* are a crucial joy, intrinsic to language and culture... not a new or original thought, but Anna Husson Isozaki is delighted to find LiLT SIG members who share this conviction. She's been teaching in Japan since 1992 and her belief in sharing stories motivated her co-translations of *Crossfire* by Miyuki Miyabe and *Beyond the Blossoming Fields* by Junichi Watanabe as well as her persistence in bringing English stories to her learners. She's currently teaching reading and listening, journalism, and media studies in Kanto, and completing an MA TESOL at Kanda.

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Appendix A

**Hi,**

***In these recent few years, a lot has been learned about the brain and learning language. Now we know we need to listen a lot to build the base for reading. By practice, we more quickly connect what our eyes see with the English we "heard" before and stored in our brains in audio form.***

**But---**

***Around the world, language teachers are debating how to help improve reading with help from listening, and we have not really answered "how" yet! You are the new challengers and the experts because you have been trying to do it, and trying different ways of doing it. Please let me know what you think.***

Appendix B

**End of semester book reading and listening survey** (please feel free to write more on the back!)

1. What English books did you **read or listen to** this semester?
  2. How did you arrange timing? For example: Did you try listening and reading together?  
Did you try listening, then reading later?  
Did you try reading, then listening later?
  3. Which way was best for you?
  4. How did you listen – computer, CD player, music player? In train, while walking...?
  5. Every **week**, how many hours did you **listen** to a story? 毎週何時間。。。。
  6. Every **week**, how many hours did you **read** a story? 毎週何時間。。。。
  7. How many times did you listen to and/or read your entire book or books through? 合わせて、何回その本を聞きました、または読みましたか？
  8. Did you **like** the story or stories?
  9. Do you have any changes now in your **feelings** about **listening** in English? Please explain what ways they've changed:
  10. Do you have any changes now in your **feelings** about **reading** in English? Please explain what ways they've changed:
  11. Were the "book clubs" (meeting to discuss stories) useful?
  12. Do you think you will want to **listen to** another book in the future?
  13. Do you think you will want to **read** another book in the future?
  14. Did this project help with any of your other university listening work?
- Did you feel any "side effects" like more power for:
15. catching the story better than before, even just listening?
  16. or vocabulary power up?
  17. Any other thoughts, comments or suggestions for me about this?