Promoting After-School English Book Clubs for Communicative L2 Use

Sook-Hee Kim
(Sookmyung Women's University)


This study explored how a student-led literature discussion in an out-of-school book club offers young ESL learners the opportunity to promote their second language use. A group of privileged English language learners in grades 4-5 were observed during a 60-minute-long book club that took place twice weekly in a local public library over a period of four months. The data sources included field notes, 32 audio-taped literature discussions, interviews, and written surveys with students and their parents, students' response journals, and the researcher's journal. To describe the verbal interactions among students during student-led literature discussions, constant comparative analysis was conducted in combination with discourse analysis. The student talk during the student-led literature discussion was characterized by the students' control of topic and its management, engagement in higher-order thinking, and collaboration. This study emphasizes the value of embedding reading comprehension strategy instruction in a literature discussion and extends the understanding of Vygotskian social constructivism applied to second language and literacy learning by exploring interactions among nonnative English learners.

I. INTRODUCTION

Abundant research in L1 reading research (Almasi & Gambrell, 1997; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Leal, 1993; Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Raphael, Goatley, McMahon, & Woodman, 1995; Wells, 1995) has investigated peer collaboration during the student-led literature discussion and has reported its success with a wide range of students from primary grades to upper grades. In line with the success of the student-led literature discussion in L1 reading research, a body of research has been conducted on student-led literature discussions with English language learners from diverse backgrounds. The first line of
research was conducted with English language learners in a mainstream class (Goatley, Brock, & Rahael, 1995; Raphael & Brock, 1993). It was reported that Book Club provided a context to experiment with language-in-use in a meaningful and functional way because students used L2 to write about and talk about ideas that they considered to be meaningful (Brock, 1997). Another line of research was conducted with Spanish bilingual students (Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 2000; Peralta-Nash & Dutch, 2000). It was reported that the young English language learners were able to have rich discussions when they had regular opportunities to engage with books from a transactional perspective and when the learner’s backgrounds and worlds were integrated into the classroom.

Although a body of research has reported the success of literature discussions with young English language learners within a classroom environment, there is a lack of research on literature discussions led by young English language learners in an out-of-school book club. This study attempted to create a community of learners in a non-formal learning context, that is, an out-of-school book club, to provide students with various kinds of learning opportunities that require them to participate in and use language. Based on the belief that second language learning is a process of socialization in which students and teachers are both active participants, the focus of the study was on the students’ participation as well as the acquisition of L2. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of the student talk that occurred during the student-led literature discussion in an out-of-school English book club?
2. How does the use of reading comprehension strategies influence the student talk that occurred during the student-led literature discussion in an out-of-school English book club?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Vygotskian social constructivist theory of learning is based on the belief that children’s learning and development are influenced by interactions with others within specific social and cultural contexts. The key to Vygotsky’s theory of learning and development is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which marks the distance between the child’s actual and potential development—the distance between what already has been achieved developmentally and what is in the course of maturing (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) described the ZPD as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in
collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Although early research on the ZPD places much emphasis on the adult's role, Vygotsky argued that the level of potential development is determined not only through adult scaffolding but also through collaboration with more capable peers.

1. Student-Led Literature Discussion

Influenced by the notion of peer collaboration within the ZPD, a body of research both in L1 and L2 has reported the success of peer collaboration during student-led literature discussions. Student-led literature discussion groups can be characterized by some common features: the use of high-quality literature in the form of trade books; opportunities for all students to participate through interaction with peers; accepting and valuing personal responses as highly as traditional displays of comprehension; and a natural approach to structuring conversations about texts and determining discussion topics (Raphael et al., 1995). The results of L1 reading research have indicated that discussing texts provides students with opportunities to explore multiple interpretations of literature, which allows the development of a deeper understanding of literature as well as higher-order thinking skills (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Samway et al., 1991).

Samway et al. (1991) examined in a 5th/6th grade classroom the implementation of literature study circles, an approach that emphasizes discussion of children's literature. After a few days of independent reading, each group met with the teacher for a 20- or 30-minute discussion to share the students' initial reactions to the book. Although initially many students were reluctant and inexperienced readers, they became more confident, engaged, and knowledgeable toward the end of year. The literature circles provided the students with an opportunity to read about, discuss, and gain a better understanding of some key issues that affect them and other issues related to their own lives and experiences. The researchers found that in literature study circles, the students naturally and spontaneously compared books and authors; initiated and sustained discussion topics; built their literary repertoire; and made connections. Samway and Whang (1996) highlighted the following features in implementing literature study circles: reading complete books; talking about books, particularly in an open-ended fashion; having some choice over which books to read; and having plenty of time to read.

Raphael and McMahon (1994) implemented a Book Club, a method of teaching literature by integrating reading, writing, student-led discussion groups (book club), whole-class discussions (community share), and instruction. The book clubs were composed of three to five students who were mixed in terms of gender, ethnicity, and reading ability. The students were instructed on how to participate in groups to discuss
ideas relating to the themed books they had read. They found that during book club conversations, students held coherent thematic discussions, encouraged each other to contribute, and over time, students’ reading log responses became more sophisticated. The research results indicated the value of building instructional models around authentic literacy experiences and literature.

However, literacy educators (Au, 1998; Delpit, 1988; Reyes, 1991) expressed concern that innovative pedagogies used with learners from the mainstream majority culture may not be equally effective with learners from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds unless those learners’ special needs are taken into account. In a similar context, Goldenberg (2006) argued that with additional structure and support, effective language and literacy education for native English learners is also good for English language learners from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Embedding reading comprehension strategy instruction in the literature discussion would accommodate the language demands of young English language learners who are still in the process of developing their L2.

2. Reading Comprehension Strategies

Studies on instruction of reading comprehension for L2 learners have investigated the instructional practices and models that have empirical support for being effective in improving reading comprehension in native English-speaking students. Drawing on L1 reading research, a body of L2 reading research has examined the instructional approaches of reading comprehension strategies, such as reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and collaborative strategic reading (Klinger & Vaughn, 1999) and has reported a positive effect of these models in improving L2 learners’ reading comprehension (Fung, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2003; Klinger & Vaughn, 1996, 1999). These instructional models are characterized by teaching multiple reading comprehension strategies using explicit instruction and emphasizing the social aspects of learning. In the following section, I will examine studies on two individual comprehension strategies that appear to be most helpful for L2 learners and were thus focused in this study: generating questions by students and making connections.

1) Generating Questions

Generating questions by students is one of the most helpful comprehension strategies for L2 learners, because it can provide students with a framework where active dialogical interaction can take place through asking and responding to each other’s questions. The generating question strategy can take two different forms: students develop questions
about important aspects of the text and address them to their teacher or to other students, or students ask themselves questions to monitor their own comprehension while they are reading. In both cases, creating and answering questions helps students focus on the content of the text and remember it better. Rosenshine, Meister, and Chapman (1996) point to the important role of question generating in reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). As the generating question strategy require students to investigate texts, to identify important ideas, and to tie parts together, it engage the students in a deeper processing of the text, which lead them to better reading comprehension. They further state that generating questions involves both cognitive and metacognitive strategies because the process of asking questions enhances comprehension through the focus on content and also helps students check their understanding to see if they have learned the content. Another reason why L2 learners can greatly benefit from the questioning strategy is that it can be used to develop students’ higher-level thinking skills. Reading instruction with L2 learners often appears to focus on producing lower levels of thinking though recitation of basic information (Anderson & Roit, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1995; Waxman, Walker de Felix, Martinez, Knight, & Pardon, 1994). A few studies have been conducted on generating inferential questions in an attempt to develop students’ higher-level thinking skills and have reported its effectiveness in engaging students in more complex knowledge construction (King, 1994; King & Rosenshine, 1993).

2) Making Connections

The making connection strategy is another helpful reading comprehension strategy for L2 learners, which helps them to have access to their prior knowledge or experiences. The RAND Reading Study Group (2001) reported on the importance of the student’s ability to use what they know to understand what they read. Taylor, Pearson, Clark, and Walpole (1999) also reported that effective teachers in their study helped readers make connections between the texts they read and their personal lives and experiences. According to Keene and Zimmermann (1997), to relate unfamiliar text to one’s prior knowledge or personal experience, connections generally take three forms: text-to-self connections; text-to-text connections; and text-to-world connections. The text-to-self connections are personal connections that readers make between the text they read and their own life experiences. The text-to-text connections are intertextual connections that students make between different texts—for example, linking an element of a text to another text they have read or to a movie. The text-to-world connections are larger connections that students make between what they read to bigger issues or events of the world.
III. METHODOLOGY

The theoretical framework that guided this study was the sociocultural model of Vygotsky, who considers the learning process as a social phenomenon that allows individuals to construct and internalize understanding through social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Since my research questions demand a descriptive analysis of the student talk and interactions among students based on an in-depth understanding of their situated learning context, I used a qualitative case study. Rather than simply implementing or testing the instructional practices proven to be effective in L1 reading research, I wanted to go through lived experiences and describe the meaning of these experiences in depth for other teachers of young English language learners to have a vicarious experience through this case.

1. Participants

In order to provide insight into the research question for my study, the participants in this study were purposefully selected. Five Korean English language learners who were about to enter grades 4-5 in Midwestern elementary schools in the U. S. were selected, because students in these grades have been exposed to a variety of literacy experiences in L1 and are thus better prepared to develop a deeper understanding for literature discussions. As this study took place in an out-of-school environment starting from summer vacation, students who were willing to commit themselves to the book club over a period of four months including the vacation were selected. Also, having attended a U. S. school for at least a semester was another criterion for student selection assuming that they had acquired basic words and communication skills in English.

Eric, an incoming 5th grader, had come to the U. S. three years earlier at the beginning of the book club. According to the Qualitative Reading Inventory (Leslie & Caldwell, 2001) taken at the beginning of the book club, he was reading at grade level. At the entry of the study, the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) was used to be informed of the individual student's reading level in terms of word recognition, oral reading, and reading comprehension. Although his oral reading appeared to be fluent, he had missed a few comprehension questions. During most of the literature discussions, Eric was facilitative and informative, often willing to help others. Since he had been exposed to U. S. culture for a longer period of time than the rest of the group, he was often able to share his background knowledge of U. S. culture with the others. Before coming to the U.S., he had studied the basic alphabet and conversation skills for three months.

Mike, an incoming 5th grader at the outset of the book club, had lived in the U. S. for six months prior to the book club. He was reading below grade level, at the third grade level
when he was measured on the QRI. During book club sessions, he had a tendency to speak in a low voice without clearly articulating the words, which often led others, especially girls, to request him to clarify his words. In Korea, from age 4 to 6, he had studied English based on phonics for twenty minutes once a week. Next, he attended a private institute twice a week to learn to read English story books for two years. After that, he learned English conversation in a private institute for an hour every day for two years. Before coming to the U.S., he was tutored in English conversation by a native speaker for one hour once a week.

Harry, Mike’s younger brother, was an incoming 4th grader at the outset of the book club in the summer. He had lived in the U.S. for six months prior to the book club. The QRI test results indicated that he was reading below grade level, at the second grade level. Although his mother knew he was reading below grade level, she wanted him to be included with his brother, even just sitting, hoping that he would become more interested in English reading. Although Harry was a less fluent English reader, he was the most popular member of the group. His mother said Harry started learning English when he was five years old in Korea. He had studied English for twenty minutes once a week for the first three years based on phonics. After that, he attended a private institute for an hour every day for two years. Like his brother, before coming to the U.S., he was tutored in English conversation by a native speaker for one hour once a week.

Claire was an incoming 4th grader at the outset of the book club in the summer. Although she had lived in the U.S. only for six months, she was already a fluent English speaker. Her results on the QRI showed that she was reading at grade level. During book club sessions, she enjoyed talking and dominating the discussions, due to the amount of experience she had had with English from a very early age. When Claire was four, she had attended a private kindergarten in Korea that was taught in English. According to her mother, Claire continued to learn English by daily watching English children’s television shows for one or two hours—Sesame Street, Dora, and Blue’s Clues, and by reading English picture books with her mother.

Jenny was an incoming 4th grader at the outset of the book club in the summer and had come to the U.S. the year before. Her QRI results indicated that she was reading at grade level. During the literature discussions, Jenny often showed genuine interest in the books she was reading. However, according to her mother, Jenny did not particularly enjoy reading in Korea. Her mother explained that this was partly because Jenny’s elementary school had an unconventional philosophy which emphasized teaching children to become familiar with the rhythm of nature. To this end, the school encouraged the students to play outside rather than do inside reading, and the parents were instructed to do the same with their children. Throughout her three elementary school years in Korea, her teachers in the school taught English for an hour weekly. In addition, she was privately tutored for three
hours weekly for four months before coming to the U. S.

2. Procedures

1) First Phase of the Study

The research project took place in three phases. During the first phase of the study (Weeks 1-4), the reading comprehension strategies, such as generating questions, making connections, summarizing, and clarifying, were taught. Each strategy was taught through explicit instruction based on the gradual release of responsibility model: teacher modeling of the strategy, collaborative use of the strategy with plenty of support from the teacher, guided practice with gradual release of responsibility, and independent use of the strategy (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). As the participating students were familiar with the summarizing and clarifying strategies, more focus was put on making connections and generating open-ended questions. To prepare for each discussion, students were asked to read the assigned reading and to record their ongoing responses using the reading comprehension strategies they had learned.

2) Second Phase of the Study

During the second phase of the study (Weeks 5-8), the discussion skills, the elements of good discussions were introduced. Although the instructional focus was put on discussion skills during the second phase of the study, the students were also asked to use the learned comprehension strategies with discussion roles—Question Writer, Connector, Summarizer, and Vocabulary Finder (Daniels, 1994). The use of discussion roles was aimed at providing students with more equal opportunities to talk as well as facilitating the students’ internalization of the comprehension strategies that they had learned during the first month of the study (Weeks 1-4). In addition, the role of Discussion Leader who guided the flow of the discussion, and the role of Passage Picker who shared his or her favorite parts were added.

3) Third Phase of the Study

During the third phase of the study (Weeks 9-16) when students ran their own literature discussions, the discussion roles except Discussion Leader were removed because the students preferred to share their responses more freely. I also sometimes participated in the discussion as a fellow reader (Wells, 1995) to guide the group into thinking about alternative perspectives. To encourage more in-depth understanding of the texts as well as
extended writing, the students were asked to write responses in their journals about the assigned reading.

3. Materials Used

Based on the students’ interests, I brought a collection of books at their reading level (grades 2-5) and students chose books they wanted to read by vote. During the first two months, they read *Because of Winn-Dixie* (DiCamillo, 2001), *Frindle* (Clements, 1996), *Dogs* (Simon, 2004), *Everything Dog* (Crisp, 2003), *On Board the Titanic* (Tanaka, 1996). During the last two months, they read, *Animals Nobody Loves* (Simon, 2002), *So You Want to Be President* (St. George, 2000), *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Coerr, 1999), *You Can’t Take Your Body To a Repair Shop* (Ziefert & Ehrlich, 2004). Students were also asked to bring their favorite books to share with the rest of the group through book talk during the last two months of the study.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

This study was conducted in an out-of-school context over a period of four months from July through October, 2006. I tutored and observed a group of five Korean English language learners of mixed-gender and mixed-ability during a 60-minute-long book club that took place twice weekly in a local public library. Data sources used in this study included participant observation, 32 audio-taped book club sessions, interviews, written surveys with students and their parents, students’ response journals, and the researcher’s journal.

In this study, the constant comparative method was used in combination with discourse analysis. The constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was used to discover recurrent themes and macro patterns that characterized the contexts by reading and rereading multiple forms of data (transcribed discussion sessions, field notes from observation, interviews, written surveys, and students’ response journal). Discourse analysis, on the other hand, was used to examine the micro patterns incorporated in specific verbal interactions to understand both the forms and functions of these interactions and the ways in which they indicate and support the recurrent macro pattern (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Focusing on the characteristics of the students’ sustained talk, the student talk during the student-led literature discussion was explored. When the initiated topics were extended into multiple exchanges for the topics to be developed, the segments were further analyzed to examine the factors that contributed to the development of different types of students’ sustained talk. Recurrent themes and patterns were identified from the data and classified into the following categories: unpredictable itinerary of
student talk; personal experience; engagement in higher-order thinking; guiding one another's thinking; avoidance of L1 use; successful and unsuccessful collaboration. The successful collaboration was further subcategorized into student-student interactions that facilitate learning opportunities: modeling, correcting, clarifying, eliciting, elaborating, confirming, agreeing, praising, and inviting to talk.

5. Validity Issues

To establish trustworthiness of the study, the issues of credibility and transferability were addressed as follows:

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation is a mode to improve the probability that more credible findings and interpretations will be produced. Triangulation involves multiple data collection methods as well as multiple data sources, investigators, and theoretical perspectives. In this study, triangulation occurred mainly across multiple data sources through the verification of themes, issues, and findings.

Peer debriefing is another activity recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for establishing credibility because this can provide researchers with the opportunity to clarify or probe their biases and explore meanings for interpretation. Two graduate students who have experience in tutoring English to Korean elementary school students were included in my peer debriefing group.

In addition, member checking was used to address the credibility of this study. By having students listen to the audio-taped discussion sessions and reflect on their performance during the discussions, I checked my tentative interpretations. Also, informal conversations with the students' parents after the tutoring sessions were used as occasions for sharing and checking my tentative findings.

Transferability in this study was addressed through the detailed description so that readers can determine how closely their situations match the research situation and whether findings can be transferred.

IV. RESULTS

During the last two months of the study, the control of the discussions was transferred to the students from the teacher as the teacher gradually withdrew from participating and instructing. The discussions in the beginning were teacher-led, while the discussions during the last two months, especially towards the end, were exclusively student-led and student-run. The results of the data analysis are based on the data collected during this phase of the study, which is referred to as student-led literature discussions.
During the student-led discussions, the participating students used comprehension strategies as a springboard for the discussions and talked together to extend their understanding of the text they were reading. The reading comprehension strategies, such as questioning and making connections, triggered a vast array of topics that focused on personal feelings or opinions, personal experiences, text-to-text or text-to-world connections and prior knowledge. In the teacher-led discussions, the curriculum was pre-established and the teacher regulated the topic of focus, thereby reducing the spontaneity of the students. However, during the student-led discussions, the students were given the freedom of topic initiation and turn taking, which increased the spontaneity and thus created student talk, which was unpredictable.

1. Unpredictable Itinerary of Student Talk

In the beginning of the study, the participating students were already familiar with reading comprehension strategies such as summarizing and clarifying. However, they were unfamiliar with the making connections strategy, which consisted of text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. The students preferred to use this newly learned strategy more than any other strategy during the discussions, as revealed in the results of the written survey. The making connections strategy was helpful because it allowed the students to bring up topics that were meaningful to them by drawing on their prior knowledge or personal experiences. The following excerpt is from a discussion on *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* (Coerr, 1999), a story after the end of World War II about a Japanese girl who had leukemia, or the "atom bomb disease." In this excerpt, Eric makes a text-to-text connection.


Excerpt 1. South or North Korean?

1. J: Eric?
2. E: My connection is text-to-text connection. Once I read a book called McArthur.
3. M: (whispers) I know.
4. E: A book about wars and other stuff, captain and the whole America, and Pearl Harbor was bombed. He and his armies set out to the sea and bombed Japan. The book matches and Sadako's grandma died of that bomb atom bomb.
5. J: Is it nonfiction?
6. E: Nonfiction... I don't know.
7. C: Is that book related? If they are related, how they are related?
8. E: Sadako's grandma died of atom bomb and the people in America dropped the bomb at Japan.
9. C: It's like the story is when Sadako was born or she was a baby.
10. J: How do you pronounce this?
12. J: No, the disease.
13. C: You mean the girl?
14. J: No, the secret. Sadako got this dizziness because of
15. E: Leukemia.
16. J: Oh yeah that one.
17. C: It's like many people in Japan got the disease called leukemia and in Korean you call it ki-young.
18. E: ki-young-a is disability. That's a baby.
21. J: I think the atom bomb didn't land in Korea but how come they got leukemia?
22. C: In Japan they got leukemia, they got atom bomb.
23. E: And recently North Korea bombed South Korea.
24. C: Not really.
25. J: Are we South Korean?
27. E: In underground.
28. T: They did a nuclear test in North Korea but not in South Korea.
29. J: Oh we're South Korean. I thought we're North Korean. I told my friend I'm from North Korea. (Students laugh.)
30. E: That's almost like impossible...kind of... because North Koreans are very poor.
31. J: I'm not poor.
32. M: If you told your friend, she or he you told that to someone, he or she is going to tell to their parents, and they will say "Don't play with her."
34. M: Like North Korea is suspicious and nobody knows what they are going to do.
35. C: North Korea, not all the people are poor. Some people are rich.
37. C: (to E) Not all the people, so you're a little bit wrong.
(Jenny tells Harry to say something, indicating that he has stickers to use.)
38. H: What?
40. H: Is it connection?

This example features three types of students' sustained talk that frequently occurred during the student-led literature discussions: response-related talk (Turns 1-9, 23-37), language-related talk (Turns 10-22), and procedure-related talk (Turns 38-41). Response-related talk occurred when students shared their responses to text as they talked about their favorite parts, wondering questions, and text-to-self, text-to-text, text-to-world connections. Language-related talk often occurred when students interacted with their peers to clarify confusing words or parts. Procedure-related talk often occurred when students talked about the process of participation during the student-led literature discussion.

The above excerpt begins with response-related talk when Eric makes a text-to-text connection (Turn 4). The topic shifts when Jenny asks the group about the pronunciation of the word 'leukemia,' and the focus of the topic switches to language (Turn 10). Claire further builds on the meaning of the word 'leukemia' with the rest of the group (Turn 17). In the next part, Eric makes a text-to-world connection (Turn 23) and goes back to the main topic—the nuclear bomb. However, the topic again shifts when Jenny asks a wondering question about her identity (Turn 25), inspired by Eric's connection of the nuclear bomb being dropped in Japan with North Korea's nuclear test. Still another topic shift comes in when Jenny, as discussion leader, invites Harry to join the discussion (Turn 39). As in the above example, the students' talk in the student-led literature discussion was often deployed with an unpredictable itinerary as the students' contributions were constructed on the spot in response to one another's comments and questions.

This example demonstrates the students' control in topic management during the student-led literature discussions. When the students were given freedom in what to say and when to say it, they were able to initiate topics that were meaningful to them. Moving smoothly from reading response to language, from language to reading response, and from reading response to procedure, they were able to develop the topics into multiple exchanges. This example also illustrates the various interaction strategies the students used to facilitate learning opportunities: eliciting further information (Turns 5, 7, 33), seeking help (Turn 10), requesting clarification (Turn 13, 21), clarifying (Turn 14), modeling (Turn 11, 15), confirming (Turn 16), elaborating (Turn 17, 34), correcting (Turn 18), and inviting
to talk (Turn 39). Using these interaction strategies, students were able to co-construct the meaning of the text they were reading, expand their knowledge about world politics, and learn L2 along with the ability to learn from others.

It is interesting to note the third part of this example, which creates opportunities for these young English language learners to engage in authentic communication. Jenny brings up the topic of her identity as a South Korean (Turn 25), which she might not have had a chance to talk about before. When new to the U.S., Koreans from South Korea often feel awkward identifying themselves as ‘South Koreans’ because they are used to identifying themselves as ‘Koreans’ rather than ‘South Koreans.’ However, being abroad, they realize that people are more interested in North Korea because of the media’s coverage of North Korea’s recent development of nuclear weapons. Eric’s initiated topic on North Korea motivates Jenny to communicate her experience and the rest of group also joins in the discussion sharing their knowledge about North Korea. This part is characterized by students’ spontaneity and willingness to communicate with other members in the group. Although spontaneity and willingness to communicate are important elements in L2 acquisition, they are often neglected in an L2 curriculum, especially in the context of learning English as a foreign language.

2. Engagement in Higher-Order Thinking

The questioning strategy was another reading comprehension strategy that the participating students often used to initiate topics during the student-led discussion. They asked questions that came to mind while they were reading. As one of the instructional focuses during the first two months was on scaffolding to generate open-ended questions, the participating students became capable of constructing questions that were thought-provoking when they led their own discussions. Interestingly, Harry and Mike, who were less fluent English speaking students, often came up with interesting questions that fueled discussions, even though their questions included some grammatical mistakes. Since these students had come to the U.S. only six months prior to the beginning of the study, they were relatively less fluent in English than the others in the group. The ability to pose thought-provoking questions did not entirely depend on English proficiency because these students already possessed the ability to pose higher-order thinking questions in L1, and this naturally transferred to L2.

In the following excerpt, Mike generates a question, looking at an illustration in The Name Jar (Choi, 2001), a picture book about Unhei, who has recently moved to the U.S. with her family from Korea, and she decides to keep her Korean name instead of getting a new American name. The illustration depicts young characters hanging out in the street and in a store without their parents.
Excerpt 2. Hanging out without guardians.

1. M: How did they hang out without their guardians?
2. T: Guardians?
3. E: Mom and dad.
5. C: Mom and dad.
7. J: I know what guardian means, but I don’t get what he is saying. How did they hang out?
8. T: Can anybody help? How can they hang out without adults?
10. E: It can be New York.
12. E: In the streets in the streets or on campus, you just walk alone?
13. J: I have to.
14. T: What he means is, here, how do they go to store without their parents?
15. J: Because it’s like one of chores.
16. C: Like in Korea, me I go to the store, it’s called simbooroom [errands].
17. E: I did that lot of times, like tons of times.
18. J: Simbooroom is chores.
19. C: I think Joey is older old enough too, he doesn’t need a guardian. And Korean people, like me, I don’t need a guardian. I go to the store really fast.
20. E: In America, they do need guardians.
21. J: How do you know that Joey’s mom is not there? Maybe she is there and Joey’s just ran off. I mean not ran off I mean, but Joey’s mom is at the next shop and they just show Joey.
22. M: I know why, because Eunhye’s family didn’t know that Eunhye is not supposed to hang out without their parents, guardians.

In this example, because of the cultural difference, Jenny does not understand Mike’s question and is confused why Mike brings up the question. As the teacher and group first attempt to explain the meaning of the word “guardian,” Jenny clarifies the focus of her question (Turn 7). To justify her opinion, Jenny refers to her personal experience: she has to hang out alone because it is like one of the errands or chores she has to do (Turn 15). Claire jumps into the conversation by pointing out her experiences in Korea (Turns 16, 19). Then Eric, who has lived in the U.S. for a longer period than the others, informs the group
that in the U. S., children must be supervised by adults (Turn 20). Jenny searches for an alternative explanation and argues that the parents of the characters in the story are simply not in the picture because they are in another section of the store or in the next store (Turn 21). Mike also joins the discussion with his inference: Eunhye’s parents, new to the U. S., might not know that children should be accompanied by their guardians on most occasions (Turn 22).

Unlike in the previous excerpt (Excerpt 1), the students’ talk in this example was focused on one topic, without shifts, and the topic was maintained as the students built on each other’s questions and comments. As Mike generated an interesting discussion question, the rest of the group actively engaged in thinking, going back and forth between the two cultures and drawing on their personal experiences. Once the question was clarified, to deduce plausible or alternative explanations, students actively engaged in higher-order thinking, such as using evidence from their experiences, comparing and contrasting two cultures, speculating, and hypothesizing. Since these young English language learners had recently come to the U.S. and were experiencing similar cross-cultural differences to the ones the main character experienced, this book piqued the interest of the group and engaged them in active thinking.

3. Guiding One Another’s Thinking

While attempting to answer one another’s challenging questions, students guided one another’s reasoning through collaboration during the student-led literature discussion. The following excerpt is from a discussion about coyotes in Animals Nobody Loves (Simon, 2002). Eric brings up an interesting question—“Why doesn’t coyote kill many sheep?” and the group collaborates in the joint construction of thinking to find a plausible reason for Eric’s question.

Excerpt 3.  Coyotes.

1. E: Why doesn’t coyote kill many sheep?
2. H: Because sheep is furry or bush.
3. M: (talks softly) I have a story about.
4. J: (looks at Claire who raises her hand) Claire?
5. C: When I went to Yellowstone, I saw like sheep are always on the steep place. I think coyotes can’t go there because if they go there they’ll slip down the mountain.
6. H: Oh like this?
7. C: It’s like this and...
8. J: How come the sheep can stand there?
9. C: I don't know. Always, we found sheep all the sheep [down] right there and coyotes [up] here. They can't go down there.

10. E: Yeah, they're afraid that they could die.

11. C: Yeah.

12. J: Sheep didn't afraid to die?

13. C: Sheep stayed there for whole time.

14. J: Mike?

15. M: If you try to kill sheep usually wolf kill sheep, so wolf might must live near to sheep, so coyotes must be like...[afraid], so coyotes don't kill much sheep.

16. E: I think I know it.

17. H: This doesn't make sense.

(T says to M that it was a great answer but the others didn't hear it well.)

18. M: 'Cause wolves kill many sheep, wolves must live near the sheep, so coyote...


20. M: Can't try to kill some sheep 'cause wolves might kill them.

Relating to Eric's question, Claire recalls her observations in Yellowstone Park, where she saw coyotes on the top of the hill, away from the sheep downhill (Turn 5). Although Harry's response (Turn 2) is not taken up but interrupted by Claire, Harry sets a collaborative tone (Turn 6), which helps the group to progress towards a joint construction of thinking. Eric extends the group's thinking, building on Claire's comment (Turn 10), and Jenny raises a new question challenging Eric's idea—whether sheep are not afraid of dying (Turn 12). Mike joins the discussion with his inference and guides the group's thinking—coyotes do not go near the sheep because of wolves that are usually near the sheep (Turn 15). Mike articulates his thoughts and completes his turn (Turn 20), although Jenny tries to interrupt and take her turn (Turn 19). Harry's disagreement and the teacher's request for clarification make Mike say more exactly what he means (Turn 20).

This example is characterized by a high level of collaboration among students, featuring the participation of all five members of the group, a high level of contingency in students' contributions; in other words, the students' contributions are closely dependent on each other, as well as students' explicit supportive behavior (Turns 6, 10, 11, 16). It is interesting to note Jenny's elicitations (Turns 8, 12), which challenge the others to guide the group's thinking. Although the form of the latter question appears to be closed, it also plays an important role in moving the group's thinking forward (Turn 12).
4. Problematic Avoidance of L1

Although I welcomed the use of L1 in the discussion, the less fluent students remained silent rather than joining the discussion and expressing their ideas in L1. Although other students said that they could help Harry by translating, Harry did not often use L1. As these students were influenced by the current English education policy in Korea, teaching English through English (TEE), they avoided using L1 and displayed difficulty in moving back and forth between the two languages. The TEE policy was recently implemented in Korea in reaction to the over-emphasis on the grammar-translation method that had prevailed in English classrooms in the past decades. To maximize the use of L2, English language learners are discouraged to use their L1 in English classrooms.

Unlike adult L2 learners, who seem to resort to their L1 to clarify confusing words, these young English language learners avoided the use of L1. Also, even when the meanings of words were translated into L1, they did not understand them, as in the following example.


1. J: What’s atom bomb?
2. E: Humongous big bomb.
4. C: It’s um...
5. J: What? We had a “hack?”
6. C: I don’t remember the name bomb [in English] blablabla.
8. H: Can I draw it?
10. E: It’s a bomb.
11. C: It’s like uh n.
12. H: (shows his drawing) It looks like this.
13. C: No, that’s a ‘poktan.’
14. H: (draws a missile dropped from an airplane) What about this?
15. E: Underground. It’s a bomb which spreads. It’s a bomb [that] can go long if it like kind of it spreads quickly.

In this example, to Jenny’s question about the word ‘atomic bomb,’ Eric first gives a feedback providing the definition of the word (Turn 2). Next, although the translation of the word in L1 is given by the teacher (Turn 3), Jenny does not understand the meaning of the L1 word ‘hack’ (Turn 7). Harry also joins the discussion, explaining the meaning of
‘atomic bomb’ with drawings of bombs (Turn 12) and missiles (Turn 14) rather than by directly explaining it in L1. Just as Korean English teachers who are encouraged to use other means of communication than using L1 to clarify unknown L2 words for their students, these students were used to resorting to other means, such as drawings or gestures.

Another problematic feature in these students’ use of L1 was that they often used the approximation strategy to understand unknown L2 words, which led them to have a less accurate meaning of the words. In the following examples, Claire translates ‘leukemia’ as ‘ki-young,’ which means ‘deformed’ (Excerpt 5, Turn 3) and ‘polio’ as ‘jang-ae-in,’ which means ‘disabled person’ in Korean (Excerpt 6, Turn 4).

Excerpt 5.  Leukemia.
1.  E:  Leukemia.
2.  J:  Oh yeah that one.
3.  C:  It’s like many people in Japan got the disease called leukemia and in Korean you call it ki-young.

Excerpt 6.  Polio.
1.  T:  What’s polio?
2.  C:  President Roosevelt had this one.
3.  T:  How do you say this in Korean?
5.  T:  So-ah-ma-bi.

Although the girls who participated in this study were fluent L2 speakers, they had difficulty with the translated L1 words or they did not have an accurate meaning of the words because they used the approximation strategy to avoid using L1, as in the above examples. They also sometimes had difficulty in understanding L2 words because the concept was not established in either L1 or L2, as in the following example.

Excerpt 7.  Color blind.
1.  C:  What is color blind?
2.  J:  You can’t see the color.
3.  T:  You can’t make distinctions between colors.
4.  J:  My cousin is kind of color blind.
5.  C:  What do you mean? I don’t get it.
6.  T:  How do you say it in Korean?
In this example, Claire had a hard time understanding the word 'color-blind' even after Jenny and Mike translated the meaning into Korean (Turns 7, 12). Claire did not understand how a person could see yet not distinguish the colors because she was unfamiliar not only with the word but also the concept itself (Turn 14).

V. DISCUSSION

When the control of the topic of conversation and turn-taking was transferred to the students during the last two months of the study, students could manage both the content and procedures of their learning process, supported by the use of the comprehension strategies and discussion skills they had learned in the earlier phase of the study. Although the topics sometimes shifted without a focus on one particular topic or they ended up being incomplete, this spontaneity incited the students’ motivation to participate in the discussion and to communicate their incomplete knowledge and ideas, thus creating opportunities for authentic L2 use.

The use of making connection strategy, which was relatively unknown to the participants at the beginning of the study, provided students with opportunities to initiate topics that were more meaningful and relevant to them by resorting to their prior knowledge and experiences. On the other hand, the questioning strategy encouraged the students’ active involvement in the reading and their learning through social interaction. While attempting to answer one another’s questions, the students often engaged in higher-order thinking, challenged one another’s ideas, and guided the group’s thinking. Of interest, the ability to construct thought-provoking questions did not entirely depend on the students’ L2 proficiency because the less fluent English-speaking students in this study also fueled the discussions with their intriguing questions, transferring their ability to pose higher-order questions from L1 to L2. As suggested by Cummins (1979), once students have learned the language with which to express them, concepts and skills developed in the L1 can be transferred readily to L2.

However, unlike older L2 learners who often used L1 to comprehend L2 words or texts
in previous L2 reading research (Fung, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2003; Klinger & Vaughn, 1996, 1999; Upton & Lee-Thompson, 2001), these young English language learners did not actively use their L1 resources, influenced by the idea of 'English Only.' Also, the girls in this study had problems understanding the meaning of the words translated in L1, because the concept was not established in their L1. They were fluent English speakers but had a weaker base in L1, probably because they had received a less traditional education in Korea: one student attended an English-taught kindergarten while the other student attended an unconventional elementary school that emphasized teaching children to become familiar with the rhythm of nature and encouraged them to play outside rather than doing inside reading.

VI. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore student-led literature discussions by young English language learners in order to gain an understanding of how this experience can promote their second language and literacy learning opportunities. Since book club is an excellent environment in which to stimulate students’ social interactions as well as critical thinking, the participating students used L2 as a tool for communicating with each other, helping each other, and thinking together.

This study is significant in that the reading comprehension strategy instruction was embedded in the literature discussion to accommodate the language demands of young English language learners. In other words, as these young English language learners were still in the process of developing their L2, it was important to provide them with a structure to help them participate in the discussion without being embarrassed about not knowing what to say or how to maintain the conversation. The student-led literature discussion in this study was guided by the use of reading comprehension strategies and discussion skills. While attempting to build on each others’ comments and questions during the student-led literature discussion, students were able to learn to participate in discussions developing their discourse and strategic competence. The student-led literature discussion provided young English language learners with opportunities to develop an agency to negotiate their status as members of the discussion group, showing the ability to initiate topics, control topic management, and take responsibility for their learning as a group.

1. Implications of the Study

An important implication of this study is that the students’ intrinsic motivation to use L2 is closely related to the freedom of topic initiation and turn-taking during the student-led
literature discussion. When students were given freedom of what to say and when to say it during the last two months of this study, they talked to each other without fear and boredom for communicative purposes. The freedom of topic initiation and turn-taking encouraged students’ spontaneity and willingness to communicate in L2, which in turn allowed them to have intrinsic motivation to actively participate in the discussion.

Another important implication of this study is that Korean teachers should guide students to have a positive perspective on the relationship between L1 and L2. In the past, as Korean students learned English first in 7th grade when they entered middle school, they already possessed the basic meaning of words in L1 necessary for learning. However, since English is now introduced to elementary school students, young English language learners learn L2 while at the same time developing the meaning of words in L1. As the results of this study revealed, unlike older students in L2 reading research, some of these young English language learners, particularly those who had a weaker base in L1 vocabulary, had difficulty in understanding L2 words because the meaning of the words was not established either in L1 or L2. Therefore, it is important for teachers in elementary school to help young English language learners develop the basic concepts for learning, actively going back and forth between L1 and L2 and not being discouraged from using L1.

Still another important implication of this study is that the student-student interactions among non-native English speakers can promote communicative L2 use through meaningful conversations about the books they are reading. As illustrated in this study, student-led literature discussions in book club can be considered as an excellent way to offer students opportunities to use L2 as a tool for meaningful communication as well as thinking and thus to maximize authentic L2 communication.

2. Promoting After-School English Book Clubs for Communicative L2 Use

The participating students in this study were learning English in a more favorable context than were the students in Korea because they had been exposed to an authentic environment where English is used as a means of communication in their everyday life. However, three out of five students who participated in this study had lived in the U.S. less than six months before the onset of the study. One of these new students had entered a mainstream class without having been in an ESL class because she already had almost native-like oral proficiency. The English learning environment is rapidly changing in Korea, and Korean students also have numerous opportunities and easier access to English through various means—books, audio books, television, Internet, movies, and so on. Nevertheless, what is missing and needed for English language learners in Korea in comparison to those who have lived in an English speaking country may be the
opportunity to continuously use L2 for communicating and learning. Although it would be ideal to implement a student-led literature discussion within a regular classroom environment, English is currently taught to large classes of 30-40 students from one to four hours weekly in Korean elementary and secondary schools. Considering the constraints, the book club in an out-of-school or after-school setting is a promising L2 instructional strategy that can complement the school learning that often focuses on accuracy-based L2 learning.

REFERENCES


Children’s Literature Cited


Applicable levels: elementary and secondary education
Key words: English book club, student-led literature discussion, reading comprehension strategy, generating questions, making connections

Sook-Hee Kim
Sookmyung Women's University
52 Hyochangwon-gil, Yongsan-gu
Seoul, 140-742, Korea
Email: sookheekim2@gmail.com

Received in June 2008
Reviewed in July 2008
Revised version received in August 2008