LD GRANTS UPDATE

2016 Project Grant Report–The Storytime Project
英語のお話会プロジェクト

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I was very happy to have received the 2016 Project Grant from the JALT Learner Development SIG. I used the grant to support a local library English Storytime project that I have been leading for the past two and half years.

Background

I started the Storytime project in cooperation with my local public library in 2014 with the goal of giving children in the community a free opportunity to hear English children's books and songs read by native or expert English speakers. Along with that goal, I imagined that it might be possible to involve students from my university as co-leaders of the sessions. Thus, the project was envisioned as offering community children free chance to hear English storybooks and songs in native or expert English, and providing my students an opportunity to use the English they study at university while contributing educationally to the surrounding community.

My local public library already offered 読み聞かせ (i.e., reading times) in Japanese a number of times per month. However, they had no reading times in English despite having a selection of 300-400 English books for children. I thought that offering English Storytime for children might be popular, and suggested the idea to the library staff in 2013. At that time, I was told there was no open time to schedule English Storytime. After a year, I decided to ask again. In 2014, the staff was more enthusiastic about the idea. After discussion with the library, it was agreed that some of my university students and I would lead English Storytime together.

Implementation

In the fall of 2014, three students and I led the first two Storytime sessions, each of which lasted 20-30 minutes. There were 30-40 children and parents at each meeting—both large groups compared to usual Japanese reading times. This was encouraging. However, as I explored getting more students involved, I found a problem I had not considered—transportation costs. Because English Storytime took place on Saturday mornings, I would have to pay for student transportation costs. Moreover, various policies prevented me from using university research funds. Reluctantly, I gave up having students lead the reading time with me, and from 2014-2016, I led English Storytime on my own.

From 2014-2016, I continued to feel that the Storytime project was worthwhile. It was continuously well-attended, and certain children would come often and interact with me more and more each time. Also, the library staff were pleased it was being offered. Nevertheless, I continued to feel that involving university students would greatly improve Storytime for everyone involved. For my students, I felt that it would give them an opportunity to use English in Japan in a meaningful way in the community. Students at my university often say that a main reason for learning English is to communicate with foreigners. Yet, in the future my students might also have opportunities to teach English to children here in Japan, and many of them will likely have children of their own someday to whom they will want to teach English. For the children attending the sessions, I felt that listening to a variety of English speakers, not just a "foreigner" or "native speaker," could help them develop a broader image of "English speakers." Seeing and listening to Japanese college students reading and speaking in fluent English could be inspiring to young people attending the English Storytime sessions.

After joining the Learning Development SIG in 2016 and receiving the LD-SIG communications, I learned about the Project Grant. I immediately thought to apply for funding for the English Storytime project. I wanted to use the grant for two purposes: funding student transportation and purchasing new books for English Storytime.

Since Receiving the LD-SIG Grant
Since receiving the grant, I have purchased eleven new books and conducted English Storytime with three students for whom I covered transportation costs.

At the last Storytime meeting in November, each of the three participating students read one book by themselves. One student read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, another read *Five Little Monkeys* by Eileen Christelow, and another read *Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes* by Eric Litwin. In order to prepare for reading, I met with the students twice before the Storytime session to model reading aloud and to listen to them read. I also recorded myself reading the books so they could listen to how I read them. I cautioned them to especially pay attention to intonation changes, as I have found this to be the most difficult aspect of reading aloud for my students. All three students did excellent preparation for the English Storytime reading. They were all nervous to read in front of the group. I was contacted afterwards by one student who said she was "very nervous" but it was a "good and very memorable experience".

Reflection
Successes
The next English Storytime session will be at the end of March, and I am involving three new students at that time. Another student has expressed interest in joining for a future session. Receiving the LD-SIG grant has encouraged me to continue involving students going forward, even though the costs will gradually go beyond the grant.

I am generally pleased with the English Storytime project. Though it is a small project, I feel the goal of giving community children a free opportunity to hear English storybooks and children's songs has been achieved. Now, with the involvement of my students, the project has gained a new layer of meaning: university students make a contribution to the surrounding community, and also gain an authentic experience using English. Though I have not received formal feedback from the library, they continue to seem pleased to have English Storytime offered at the library.

Future Issues to Consider
Despite my enthusiasm for continuing the English Storytime project and continuing to involve students, there are certain elements of the project with which I am not completely satisfied.

One issue I am dealing with is how to further enhance the experience for participating college students. Ideally, I would like students to join the project for a long period, for example, at least three Storytime sessions. With a longer commitment from students, I feel students could improve their communication abilities, and as a group we could add more variety to Storytime activities (e.g., a short puppet show).

Another issue for me to consider is whether the experience is appropriate at all for lower level students. In November, the three students who participated were among the most proficient students that I knew. Their pronunciation was clear, they could read fluently, and they had confidence. I would enjoy drawing from a bigger pool of student volunteers, but if I were to open participation to more students, I will likely get volunteers who do NOT speak English so well. In that case, further training will probably be necessary. However, even with further training, I do not feel that most students could read well enough in front of a group of children and parents. Thus, the issues are: What type of English is

appropriate for Storytime? How much of an accent is acceptable? What level of intonation?

On the one hand, Storytime is a free offering to the public; on the other hand, the presentation quality in Storytime is important to me. Storytime is not primarily meant to be a forum for students practicing English; rather, as expressed earlier, it is an opportunity for children to hear English books and songs spoken by native and expert English speakers. With the three students who participated in November, I definitely feel that goal was met. However, with lower-level students, I think the quality of the Storytime experience could be compromised.

A final issue on my mind is the actual value of the Storytime Project for the children and parents who attend. One of the students who participated in November mentioned that "It is a little strange to read English books, because the children do not speak English." I understood the comment. Though Storytime is not completely monolingual (i.e., using Japanese sometimes is encouraged), it is true that some of the children who come to Storytime do not speak much English, and they probably do not completely understand the stories that are read. Some of the children do not (or perhaps cannot) sing along with the songs. What value are they gaining from Storytime? Are their parents forcing them to attend for the wrong reasons? Obviously, I cannot definitively answer these questions. However, I continue thinking about how I can make Storytime as accessible and interesting as possible to the children attending, while also generally maintaining the use of English and the goal of exposing children to the sounds of English through children's books and songs.

Conclusion
I am looking forward to another year of English Storytime events. My thanks again to the Learner Development SIG for seeing value in the project and for supporting it. If anyone lives in the Nishinomiya area and would be interested in being involved with the Storytime project, please contact me.

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Reflections on and Takeaways from JALT 2016
JALT2016 の振り返りと学び

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The theme of this year's JALT conference was transformation in language education, with the goal being to explore the transformative power of education from many vantage points. Looking through the conference handbook, I was thrilled to see some of the biggest names in the field of language teaching and research as well as many presentations related to how computer technology can transform the way language is taught and learnt. The use of technology in language learning and teaching is of special interest to me, so I felt like a kid about to enter a huge candy store. What a golden feeling!

I am delighted to report on how the conference has affected my development as a language learner and teacher-researcher. For me, the main takeaways from the conference were collaborative action research, digital teaching/learning tools, and secrets of transformation in language education in Japan.

Collaborative Action Research
I began the weekend with Professor Anne Burns' plenary titled *Transforming the Shape of the Way We Work*. Burns, of the University of New South Wales (Australia), is most well known for her work introducing teachers to the excitement and usefulness of