



The Impact of Reading Positive Psychology-Themed Storybooks on Society during COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to gauge the impact and effectiveness of reading illustrated bilingual books on listeners' English language learning, creativity, and happiness during the COVID-19 pandemic. A public bilingual storybook reading was carried out with the support of two volunteer students, a professional ethnomusicologist, a Mogu-mogu project, a non-profit group, and Hon [Book] Café in Shinobuyama. Three self-published positive psychology intervention (PPI) - themed storybooks that dealt with elements of gratitude, kindness, and compassion using dialogic techniques, funded by the researcher's affiliated university were present at the reading. Post-reading, participants reported feeling grateful and almost as they had prior to the pandemic in response to the bilingual storybook. Through book reading, societal connectedness was strengthened, and organic flows of networking increased. This positive result draws attention to the significance of those factors originally motivating the project: the need to teach, learn, inspire and connect with others. It reinforced the idea that by being grateful, kind, and compassionate with others, we can be happy ourselves and spread happiness more widely.

Keywords: EDM, Logistic Regression, Student Performance, Modeling

INTRODUCTION

Time and time again, research has shown that people who read books are better informed, and aware of their environment, attitude, and the feelings of others. They are able to handle themselves in society better than non-readers, and through reading, they acquire a wide range of skills that makes them stand out in the workplace. In fact, reading books even make them healthier because people who read books are better informed about health risks and access to care, and because reading books has a positive effect on the brain. In addition: many consider reading books to be an exceptionally pleasant past-time that adds to individuals' happiness and sense of well-being (Boekwerk, 2019). Children's books are considered an important way to enhance emotions and feelings. Slogans such as 'Books build empathy' illustrate the enthusiasm for using children's literature to promote empathy and literacy.

The impact of reading books has been examined from perspectives such as psychology, neuropsychology, sociology, and teaching English as a second language. This research indicates that reading books helps both readers and listeners to develop the motivation and skills required for their intellectual, mental, psychological, and social improvement. Reading, in general, encourages reflection, the capacity to enhance imagination, self-reflection, and self-realization. Under the advent of recent societal conditions, in particular, the so-called 'new normal' brought about by COVID-19, reading books has become an even more important way to develop connections

between people, and mutual understanding. Reading enhances the ability to put oneself in the position of others, increases empathy, and enhances positive self-image, which in turn reduces the barriers to 'getting up and taking action.' Some readers read to 'lose themselves' and be carried away by the content of the book they are reading, developing a feeling of flow. This has a positive effect on their imaginative and empathic capabilities. It helps them find comfort, reflect, and be "drawn into another world," all of which can benefit their personal sense of well-being and happiness (Boekwerk, 2019).

Benefits of bilingual positive psychology-themed storybook reading

Based on the ideas mentioned above, we decided to develop bilingual positive psychology (PP) themed storybooks and present them at book readings. We intended that developing these storybooks, as described in this paper, could have a positive impact on society, especially during the difficult conditions at the time of writing. Books of this kind also bring other benefits. For example, they encourage and stimulate students' intellectual capacity to imagine the meaning of new vocabulary words they read and hear. They are a source of information for the reader and listener, assisting them to learn about a variety of related emotions. This, in turn, tends to support empathy-

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building (Kucirkova, 2019), and the maintenance of cultural values, both of which are commonly valued in society (Lamoreaux & Morling, 2012). In addition, they promote successful problem resolution and personal qualities and behaviors that are linked to successful goal achievement (Dyer, et al. 2000). In developing the storybooks, students were given the autonomy to write their own stories, and this both challenged them and intensified their curiosity about how to be more positive in life despite the pandemic situation. It was also anticipated that holding post-book reading discussions would not only enhance participants' communication skills but also their feeling of connectedness as they explored the meaning and messages of the storybooks more deeply together.

METHODOLOGY

Three original bilingual PP-themed storybooks (ST) were read in public to promote gratitude, kindness, and compassion and ameliorate happiness and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The ST had specific target vocabularies, genres, and reading timespans. The illustrations and stories of two STs, Compassion and Kindness: Booster of Happiness (CKBH) and The solitary sad elephant (SSE), were created by six students in two months as part of the English conversation class activities

at Fukushima Gakuin College. Students gave voluntary consent to the use of their stories and illustrations for educational purposes before the completion of the school term. While, The Journey of Grateful Whitey Froggy (JGWF) storybook, which has a gratitude theme and was written and incorporated photographic pictures taken by the researcher, was completed in one month (Figure 1). The English text of the JGWF storybook was then translated into Japanese by the core members of the Happy Mogu-Mogu project (HMM), a Non-Profit Organization (NPO) group in Fukushima. Through the collaboration of the researcher and HMM, a community reading at Hon [Book] Café Shinobuyama Bunko (本カフェ信夫山文庫), Fukushima was held. During the community book reading, two students who attended the event helped to read the Japanese version of the ST. Moreover, the printing and reproduction of these three bilingual storybooks were funded by Fukushima Gakuin College, with which the researcher is currently affiliated. A self-produced questionnaire used a five-point Likert Scale : (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. It is a psychometric scale that has multiple categories from which participants indicate their opinions, feelings, and attitude toward the impact of positive psychology-themed storybook reading. (Appendix 1).



Figure 1. Storybook covers showing examples of illustrations, titles and content details

Procedure

In FY 2019-2020, the students and the researcher produced PP-themed bilingual storybooks as an activity aiming to increase their vocabulary input, and improve their English writing and speaking ability. Students were first asked to write their stories in their first language (L1), Japanese, making it easier for them to create a story based on their basic ability and emotion. Then, the stories were translated into English by the researcher, taking into account the nuances and underlying messages in the Japanese text. Two bilingual storybooks and one English storybook were created. In early 2021, the three PP-themed storybooks were university-published as teaching materials with research fund support from Fukushima Gakuin College.

The researcher collaborated with HMM, a non-profit organization (NPO) in Fukushima City to share the importance of being grateful, kind, compassionate, and friendly to enhance happiness during the pandemic

among Fukushima citizens. Upon learning of the event's objectives: to enhance Fukushima citizens' happiness and improve English ability through bilingual PP-themed storybooks reading during the COVID-19 pandemic, the HMM core members freely volunteered to support the project. They agreed to translate the English storybook, JGWF, into Japanese and edited the Japanese version of CKBH and SSE. This helps to ensure the use of the correct and appropriate Japanese language. They also offered valuable assistance in promoting and carrying out the event.

HMM contacted the Hon [Book] Café Shinobuyama event's venue, which is located in Fukushima City. Initially, the event was declined due to the fear of spreading the virus, but after the deliberation to strictly avoid the 'Three Cs' (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings), the event was resumed in June 2021. Two Fukushima Gakuin University students also volunteered to participate in the event as Japanese version narrators. One of these volunteer students was also the illustrator of the

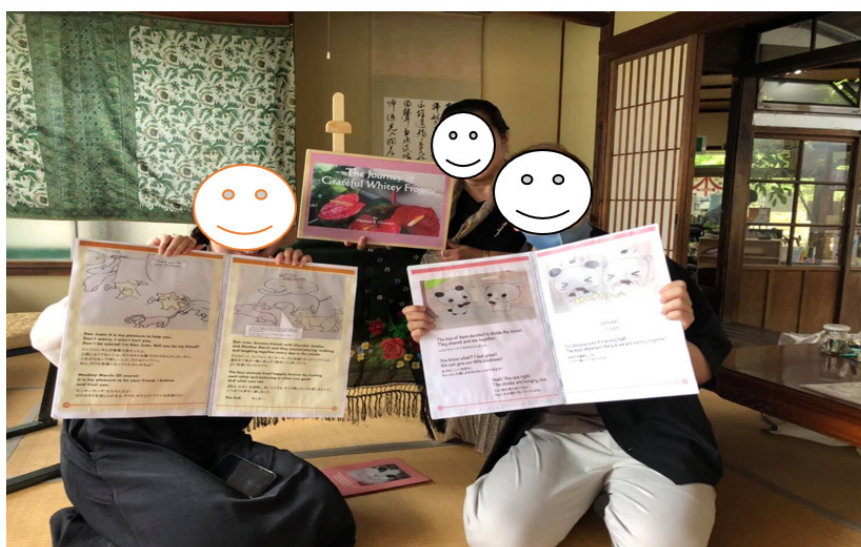


Figure 2. Ocampo (centre) displays bilingual storybooks during the reading at the Hon [Book] café in Shinobuyama (photo courtesy of J Graphic Factory)



Figure 3. Ocampo (centre) displays bilingual storybooks during the reading at the Hon [Book] café in Shinobuyama (photo courtesy of J Graphic Factory)



Figure 4. Tokyo-based ethnomusicologist and classical guitarist Kim Rockell performs during the storyreading at Hon [Book] café Shinobuyama (photo courtesy of J Graphic Factory)



Figure 5. Storybooks reading participants at the Hon [Book] café Shinobuyama (photo courtesy of J Graphic Factory)

CKBH storybook (Figure 2).

Music intervention

During an interval between the readings, a short acoustic guitar performance was included to augment listeners' happiness and relaxation. The researcher explained the event's objectives to a professional guitarist and music researcher. Based in Tokyo, the musician had spent several years living in Aizu Wakamatsu and was very sympathetic to the cause in Fukushima (Rockell, 2020). He then volunteered to perform three pieces, Natalie-Natalie by George Mustaki, Manha de Carnival by Luiz Bonfá, and the song Pokarekareana from New Zealand. As part of a story-telling event, music seems to have a narrative power of its own. This realization prompted the visiting musician to consider exploring music as a narrative in future research and community performances.

Participants

Due to strict rules in place to contain the COVID-19 virus, the Hon [Book] café Shinobuyama manager strictly limited the participants to a minimum of 13 adults and 2 children (Figure 5). The venue is a well-known, authentic book café in Fukushima so public event publication was restricted to avoid an uncontrollable increased number of listeners.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The impact of the bilingual storybook on the participants was found to be positive based on the results of their responses to a questionnaire. As already mentioned, there were three original PP-themed storybooks focusing on kindness and compassion,

friendship and connectedness, and gratitude. Participants' responses after listening to the storybook at the bilingual reading indicated that they strongly agreed to be kinder to others, and agreed with the notion that giving kindness to someone else enhances one's own happiness (Figure 6). They even agreed that they felt more grateful in life after listening to the stories (Appendix 2).

Positive psychology-themed storybook reading impact

Intellectual impact. Responses confirmed the idea that illustrated bilingual storybook reading can not only increase adults' and children's enjoyment but also help to increase their vocabularies. Japanese adult participants repeated some of the words they heard during the book reading session when they were answering the questionnaire. They were repeating these words to affirm what they learned on that day. Words and thoughts that are repeated often get stronger by repetition and sink into the subconscious mind (Sazzon, 2021). Easy words used in the questionnaire helped participants understand the questions, while on this occasion children appeared to learn fewer words than adults. However, these children participants repeated certain target vocabulary words along with their parents. Thus, joint book reading can be seen to develop children's language, literacy, and overall cognitive and intellectual abilities, confirming the findings of Saracho & Spodek, 2010. Children repeatedly uttered the following words: elephant, friend, help me, please, don't worry, run, cat, panda, kind, potato, wait, froggy, white, sad, kind, happy, and compassionate. Although two very young participants were not yet able to read, the illustrations and pictures in the storybook helped them understand the story. Moreover, providing supportive gestures, and repetition, a key feature of oral delivery (Ong, 2013), enhanced their enjoyment of the reading.

Psychological impact. Dialogic reading techniques were used partially to support the children's understanding of the message of the PP-themed bilingual storybooks. Based on the researcher's observation and followed up by an informal conversation with the parents,

children felt happy when the sad elephant found friends in the story. They also noted that the cat's name Potato was their favorite word of the day. Some of the adult listeners reported realizing the importance of friendship and learning to be happy through gratitude. Moreover, they also revealed that while listening to the intermission music, they felt the peace of mind, and became positive. One participant reported feeling as though she was by the sea. Bringing back memories of a younger time, a healing effect, and being relaxed and less tired were also reported in response to the music. The feedback of participants about the value of integrating music into small-group book reading activities is supported by scientific research. For example, it has been claimed to increase engagement (McCarthy, 2010), and improve connectedness with people's bodies and emotions (Lindblad, 2020). On this occasion, this was reflected in the disclosure of the listeners using imagery in their language such as 'I am by the sea'. Thus, the reading in Fukushima confirmed the idea that being in contact with one's emotion is important since it "lies at the heart of our capacity to experience meaning" (Johnson, 2007), and is a central ingredient of a sense of wellbeing. Emotions are at the heart of each foreign language learner and are necessary because without emotions, boredom would reign and very little learning would take place (Dewaele, 2015). Moreover, according to Macintyre & Gregersen, 2021, the imagination is powerful, in part, because the emotions that can be activated might broaden a person's perspective and opening the individual to absorb language.

During the pandemic, respondents agreed that they gave compassion and kindness to others, and were more empathetic. Though they also agreed to be compassionate with themselves, data revealed that this tendency was a bit lower. This discrepancy prompted the researcher to think more deeply about it in this study. A similar result revealed that the reason participants feared showing compassion was the perceived possibility that others would take advantage of their nature (Ocampo, 2021).

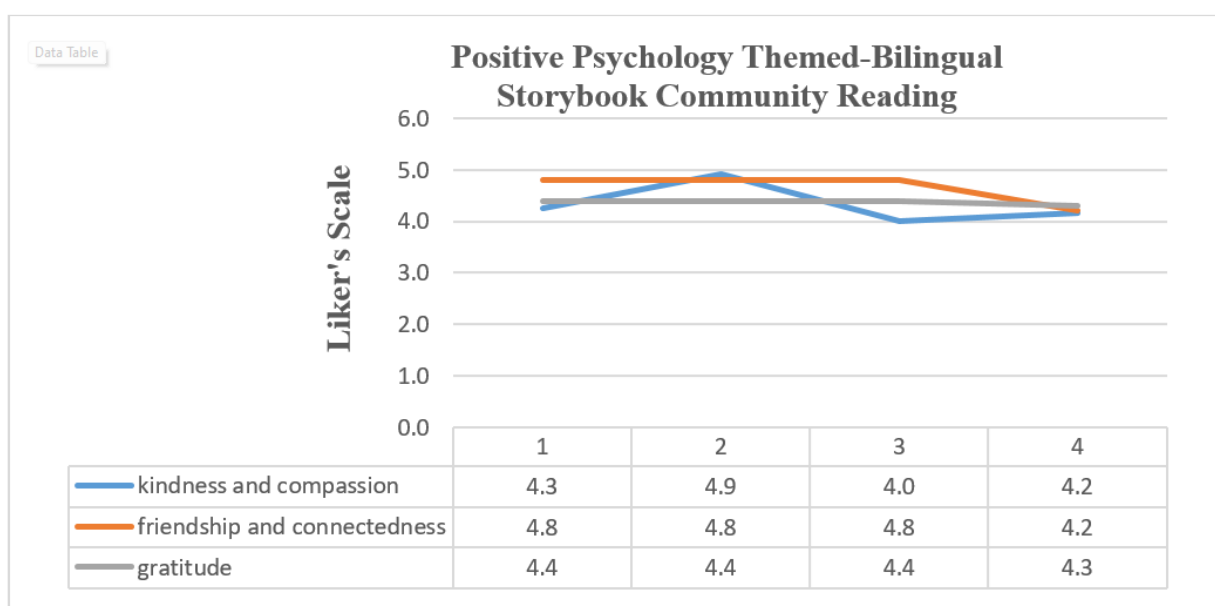


Figure 6. Impact of positive psychology-themed bilingual storybooks among participants.

Being compassionate to ourselves means that we give enough time to be with ourselves. A warm embrace of self-kindness makes our worries, problems, and even suffering bearable. It provides a soothing balm that softens the hard edges of someone's pain, which is no longer absorbed by playing the role of the one who is suffering (Neff, 2011, Neff & Germer, 2018). Participants felt a healing effect, relaxed and lessened tiredness, realized that they should be more grateful, and learned a bit about the nature of happiness. They also hoped that more children would be able to hear the stories.

The Vygotskian perspective illuminates how motivation "from within" can be fostered through the formulation of shared intentions and purposes rather than exclusively teacher-imposed goals (Uchioda, 2008; Karpov, 2003). Drawing on Vygotskian theory, learning occurs within a socio-cultural environment through the learner's dialogues with a more competent person, who might be a parent, a teacher, or a more advanced peer, and who 'mediates' the learning; models higher thought processes (Van et al., 2005). The effects of motivation, moreover, are conceptually distinct from those of pre-existing abilities and prior achievement. Even the most skilled students may not do well if they have no drive to understand, no willingness to work hard, no sense that they can be successful, or no enthusiasm for the material or skills they are faced with learning. (Wolters et al. 2011; Karpov, 2003). Supported by the perspective offered by these educational theories, the researcher, as the teacher in charge of this project, provided sufficient autonomy to the learners to finish their tasks. And, based on the assessment's result, 83% of learners' sense of self-determination increased while 17% answered no comment. This further supports that when teachers assisted learner autonomy, learners' self-determination increased (Benson, 2011). From an intercultural perspective, which the idea of bilingual delivery evokes, it is helpful to consider the observation of Pennycook (2014) who noted an attempt to push the individual, competitive, Western version of autonomy onto non-Western societies. Instead, Pennycook strongly encouraged awareness of cultural alternatives. The bilingual approach carried out during this project can be seen to offer such an alternative, and is highly recommended as a way to gather more ideas on how to relieve mental stress and anxiety.

CONCLUSION

Although the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be felt at a global level, this project operated at a local level, drawing on grass-roots support and increasing the agency of participants in Fukushima. Grateful to institutional support from Fukushima Gakuin College, NPO Happy Mogu-Mugu project, and community volunteers, an integrated, constructive intervention was successfully carried out, embedding research objectives within a wholesome, intergenerational framework and utilizing appropriate spaces in the Fukushima community. Although the promotion of happiness and wellbeing through this implementation was not easy, and the 'new normal' demanded that careful health protocols be strictly observed, the event was still able to go ahead.

Project research findings confirmed claims in the literature on the benefits of reading and also drew attention to the narrative power of music, which requires further investigation. The event's success highlighted the significance of those factors that originally motivated it: the need to teach, learn, inspire and connect with others. It reinforced the idea that by sharing something with others, we can be happy ourselves and spread happiness more widely. Through book reading, societal connectedness was strengthened, and organic flows of community networking increased. We were very grateful and touched that volunteers extended their care, abilities, and knowledge to promote gratitude, kindness, compassion, and friendship. All worked together to promote happiness and well-being during the unprecedented difficulties posed by the pandemic crisis.

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APPENDIX 1

バイリンガル絵本読み聞かせイベントのアンケート

Objective: The purpose of this study is to gather information about the general impression and impact that storybooks have on listeners' emotions and well-being in order to increase their well-being.

目的: この研究の目的は、幸福度を高めるために、ストーリーブックがリスナーの感情と幸福度に与える一般的な印象と影響についての情報を収集することです。

Procedure: Select one emoji sticker for each statement and paste it in the space that indicates your acceptance. 手順: 項目ごとに絵文字ステッカーを 1 つ選択し、承諾を示すスペースに貼り付けます。

Each statement is followed by five numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, and each number means: 各ステートメントの後には、1、2、3、4、5 の 5 つの数字が続き、各数字は次のことを意味します。