

**COMMUNITY LITERACY ACTIVISM: AMATEUR AUTHORS WRITING
MULTILINGUAL GRADED READERS****Paul Seigny***

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*(First received: 17.10.2021; final version received 31.10.2021)***ABSTRACT**

Inspired by Citizen Science, this article defines Community Literacy Activism, its relationship to the field of applied linguistics, and its benefits for the development of human resources, tools, and materials needed for diffusing innovation across languages. The concept is elucidated with an initiative for training multilingual Community Literacy Activists (CLAs) to author simplified, multilingual storybooks and lead Literature Circle (LC) discussions at an international university in Japan. Preliminary answers are offered for the following research question: How can CLAs contribute to multilingual literacy developments in their communities? Our preliminary findings reveal four general learning objectives for multilingual CLAs: second language ownership, the ability to modify language levels in the L1 and L2, intercultural communication, and inclusive facilitation skills.

Keywords: Community Literacy Activist; Citizen Science; Extensive Reading; Graded Readers, Multilingual Education

RESUMEN

Inspirándose en la Ciencia Ciudadana, este artículo define el Activismo Comunitario de Alfabetización (ACA), su relación con el campo de la lingüística aplicada y las ventajas que ofrece para el desarrollo de los recursos humanos, las herramientas y los materiales necesarios para difundir la innovación a través de los idiomas. Se dilucida el concepto con una iniciativa para capacitar a Activistas Comunitarios de la Alfabetización (ACA) multilingües para escribir libros de cuentos simplificados y multilingües y dirigir debates en círculos literarios (CL) en una universidad internacional en Japón. Se ofrecen respuestas preliminares a la siguiente pregunta de investigación: ¿Cómo pueden los ACA contribuir al desarrollo de la alfabetización multilingüe en sus comunidades? Los resultados preliminares revelan cuatro objetivos generales de aprendizaje para los ACA multilingües: apropiación de la segunda lengua (L2), capacidad para modificar el nivel de lenguaje en la L1 y L2, comunicación intercultural y habilidades de facilitación inclusiva.

Palabras claves: Activista de la alfabetización comunitaria; ciencia ciudadana; lectura extensiva; lecturas graduadas: educación multilingüe.

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Introduction

The impetus for this article was the desire to encourage the spread of Extensive Reading (ER) as a language teaching methodology in languages other than English. Extensive Reading is reading easier, longer texts for meaning (Day & Bamford, 1997). It is safe to say that ER as a methodology for L2 reading development is well-established empirically (Nakanishi, 2015; Jeon & Day, 2016). The Extensive Reading Foundation (2021) has been promoting the spread of ER methodology and materials through its biennial World Congress of Extensive Reading conferences held around the world. Yet, in second-language teaching circles in places like Japan, one quickly hears a similar story. There are very few graded reading materials available in Japanese, with the exception of NPO Tadoku (2021), which offers a small library of free books at six reading levels. Furthermore, there are still very few readers at the elementary and pre-intermediate levels, which constitute the largest need. Additionally, Japanese language ER practitioners have indicated a lack of standardized units for leveling readers in Japanese (Yoshikawa, 2021). Teachers with an interest in implementing ER in their classrooms often lack the materials and systems they need, which is evidenced by initiatives such as the one in this paper. In this case, to develop a bilingual ER program, we need equivalent and relevant stories in English and Japanese, so writing and translating stories became part of our plan.

Over the past decade, virtual libraries such as Xreading have emerged that allow language teachers to track learners' reading progress for a reasonable subscription fee. In a recent consultation with Paul Goldberg, CEO of Xreading, Goldberg said he would like to add graded readers to the virtual library system in languages other than English, but ER is not practiced much in languages other than English and thus graded reading systems and libraries are limited or non-existent (P. Goldberg, personal communication, October 8, 2021). This lack of diffusion of innovations in ER suggests there are likely other areas in applied linguistics facing similar obstacles to development. Figure 1 illustrates this variation.

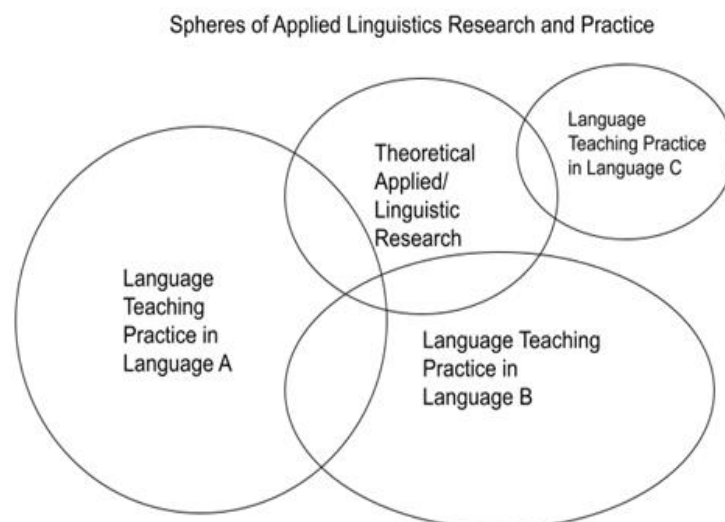


Figure 1. Spheres of Applied Linguistic Research and Practice

The field of applied linguistics encompasses a great many disciplines and spheres of action. Theoretical researchers ask questions about the nature of language learning, and practitioners work

to support learners in a variety of languages, but there are areas where developments in one language have not been achieved in others.

To address some of these disconnects, this article argues for a movement in literacy activism, which has been coined Community Literacy Activism, as a way to develop human resources and material infrastructure that supports diffusion of innovation in second language development. The next section will introduce the connections between citizen science and Community Literacy Activism.

Theoretical Underpinnings of Community Literacy Activism

Citizen Science and Community Literacy Activism

Citizen science is the involvement of the public in scientific research, in collaboration with numerous other stakeholders with varying levels of education such as managers, teachers, and professionally trained scientists (CSA, 2021). The proliferation of well-known citizen science projects has demonstrated a wide variety and levels of observation, interaction, and analysis of natural phenomena, not only for harnessing technology and volunteerism for data collection, but also for analysis and for improving the impact of scientific research more generally in society, evidenced through the equipping of amateurs (Gura, 2013).

In academic settings, involving students in citizen science has brought up several challenges relevant to when teachers involve their students in citizen science projects. For example, there is the possibility that scientific progress and new knowledge may not align with the mandate of education, which is to support the education of students (Roche et al., 2020). Other challenges include logistics, such as whether projects can be achieved within traditional school environments or involve special tools or skills, for example. The team of authors above point out the importance of following principles for carrying out citizen science such as those listed by the European Citizen Science Association (2015). One foundational point for citizen science in educational contexts is the collaboration principle to intentionally align learning goals with the scientific goal(s) (Roche et al., 2020).

In theory, all the principles and issues considered standard practice in citizen science can apply to disciplines such as applied linguistics, psychology, and education. When it comes to literacy development in multilingual communities, however, there may be rationale for suggesting a branching off from citizen science to a field that involves multilingual members of the general public in initiatives that, while theoretically supporting scientific endeavors, may prove to add more value to the field of *development* in the traditional pairing of research and *development*. More specifically, literacy initiatives may promote the development of both human resources and educational materials, which while prerequisite to implementing citizen science projects, are equally valuable in their own right.

Community Literacy Activism, then, is the involvement of multilingual citizens in initiatives that promote the development of human resources and materials for furthering multilingual and multicultural objectives, including providing infrastructure for scientific research (Figure 2). Although Community Literacy Activism is not limited to school settings, it will likely find traction there first. Training Community Literacy Activists (CLAs) in universities will then develop an infrastructure of trained school alumni who can likely participate in literacy initiatives that extend beyond school settings and into professional settings where its alumni work and live. Thus, Community Literacy Activism as an endeavor can promote the development of amateur experts who have the ability to better contribute to the support of educational and scientific projects in fields such as applied linguistics, cultural studies, and the social sciences.

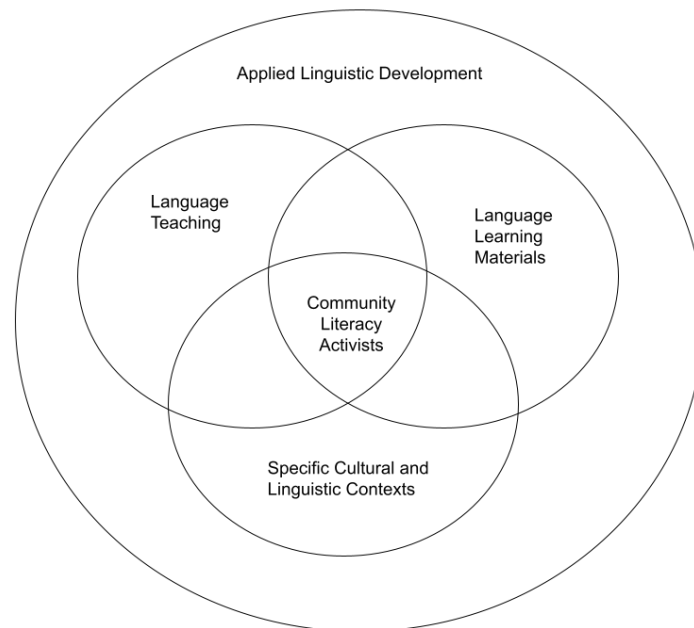


Figure 2. Applied Linguistic Development and the Field of Community Literacy Activism.

In addition to having roots in citizen science, Community Literacy Activism can usefully connect to several other fields important in language learning and teaching:

- Inclusivity and community building
- Intercultural communication
- Multicultural festivals and events
- Needs Analysis
- Language materials development

The employment of students as CLAs in school settings would support development initiatives in a wide variety of fields and communities where graduates serve.

Decentralization of Leadership and Data Gathering

In university communities, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, at least, student leadership positions necessitated physical spaces on campus, for example, writing centers for tutors, classrooms for teaching assistants, and laboratories for research assistants. Involvement of CLAs creates the affordance for developing leaders at all levels and in a variety of both formal and informal contexts. Additionally, videoconferencing and internet media have made remote collaboration more feasible. For example, alumni who work in various segments of the tourism industry might work with a team of undergraduate student CLAs at a university to develop multilingual training materials for flight attendants, hotel managers, and municipal event planners. CLAs who are interested in tourism would benefit from professional development before graduation and become part of a volunteer pool supporting language for tourism after graduation. CLAs can then benefit both in terms of language acquisition and pre-professional training in specific fields of interest. Alumni can continue to develop additional language skills while sharing professional insider knowledge with CLAs.

So far, this article has introduced the concepts of Community Literacy Activism and how CLAs might support various development goals in school and community settings. In the next section, a university initiative which employs CLAs to develop multilingual graded readers is described.

Community Literacy Activism and Extensive Reading at an International University

Context

The site of the CLA project is a dual language university in Japan, offering degrees taught in the medium of English or Japanese. The university comprises more than 5,700 students, about half Japanese-basis and half English-basis students. As a very multilingual community, there are Japanese-basis students who are not native Japanese. There are also native Japanese who qualify as English-basis students. Both Japanese-basis students and English-basis students enroll in mandatory language courses to study their counterparts' language up to the upper-intermediate level. The university currently holds students from more than 90 countries. The vast majority of the international students are from countries where the official language is not English. These groups host multicultural week celebrations each semester that feature cultural elements of their respective countries, such as traditional dances, costumes, and music, as well as a theatrical performance authored by student leaders. These theatrical scripts are potential sources for graded short stories in English, Japanese or other languages that are relevant to the school's distinctive, multicultural demographic.

Overview of the CLA Program for Bilingual Graded Reading

The CLA program at the university aims firstly to develop two anthologies of six graded short stories (an English version and a Japanese version for each) and secondly to create a multilingual discussion methodology using the graded readers. The final anthology will feature stories from the following countries: Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and one country yet to be determined. The program started in the spring of 2020 with its director and ten students and is supported by grant # 20K13154 from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (Sevigny, 2020).

CLA Roles

After the first year of the initiative, CLAs completed a survey of introspection questions. Initially, the first priority was to determine the roles and responsibilities being performed and the additional training team members needed. There are five major categories in students' roles: story writers, editors, translators, outreach/operation managers, and facilitators.

Writers are CLAs who create a story in English based on the original stage play from a multicultural week. Many of the CLA writers have taken part in the production of prior shows. Therefore, their primary task as writers is to novelize their theater works for English learners both in length and difficulty.

The editors then give constructive opinions and advice to the writers on a wide range of issues, including story structure, character development, target proficiency level, and story length. The leveling tools the writers and editors use include the Online Graded Text Editor at ER Central (Waring & Browne, 2021) and Lextutor (Cobb, 2015).

Upon completion of the English versions, the translators produce the Japanese translations of the same proficiency level as the original English versions. The translation team uses text analysis tools such as jReadability (Hasebe, Lee, & Kubo, 2013) and Reading Tutor (Kawamura & Kitamura, 1997) to check the proficiency level of translated Japanese.

The outreach manager is responsible for networking with cultural community leaders, recruiting writers, and coordinating intellectual property issues. Operation managers oversee all the CLA operations, including coordinating team schedules and meetings, overall planning, recruiting, hosting Literature Circle (LC) focus groups, and managing data.

Facilitators are involved in researching and constructing the methodology of multilingual LCs using the multilingual graded readers. Thus far, the CLA team has trialed LCs with the first English story and its Japanese translation with respective language groups. This part of the initiative will be developed more in upcoming semesters.

The first year and a half have yielded four graded readers in English, two of which have an accompanying Japanese translation. During this time, some CLA members have taken on multiple roles depending on the research and development phase. For example, a writer can be an editor for another writer. A translator can be a facilitator. In the next section, the CLA initiative will be analyzed in terms of challenges and successes.

Preliminary Analysis of the CLA Initiative for ER

The overarching research goal is to answer the following question: How can Community Literacy Activists contribute to multilingual literacy developments in their communities? The focus of this research, being preliminary, will be CLA team reflections about the challenges and successes of the ER initiative.

CLA Program Challenges

For the CLAs to effectively perform their roles in producing graded readers, it is necessary to provide guidance throughout the writing process. Amateurs have varying levels of experience when it comes to story writing, and their experience might also be for completely different contexts and purposes. For these reasons, CLAs may require personalized guidance from skilled creative writing teachers to either enhance or recalibrate their skills for writing graded readers. For instance, most students are not entirely familiar with the characteristics that define an EFL-friendly story, so they might write stories using vocabulary, phrases, or grammatical forms that are too difficult for beginner to intermediate students. Therefore, teacher-researchers who wish to employ a similar approach to materials development would need to periodically review their work to ensure quality and appropriate levelizing. They can also minimize needed revisions by explaining the expected specifications of a story at an early stage in the process.

The CLA translators also require similar forms of guidance to ensure their translations match the specifications of a Japanese graded story; however, considering that translators work with two languages instead of one, the translation process greatly benefits from guidance by a teacher-researcher who is proficient in both languages, because they can help translators navigate nuances in the two languages and deliver a translation that is both accurate and natural.

Levelizing a graded reader that is written in more than one language can also be challenging if the languages involved do not share similar standards for measuring proficiency levels. For instance, Japanese is more difficult because it involves three essential writing systems—hiragana, katakana, and kanji—whereas, English involves only one. Consulting with teachers to gain a better understanding of levelizing criteria for different languages can help teacher-researchers find similarities in proficiency levels across their target languages.

Finally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the university site of this initiative has not celebrated any multicultural weeks for the past three semesters. This has caused a shortage of existing stage plays to reinterpret into graded readers. Consequently, we had to recruit student authors to write completely original stories with an eye toward becoming future multicultural week theatrical performances.

Successes

Through the process of developing multilingual graded readers, the CLAs experienced a variety of successes. For starters, the CLAs developed a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) through negotiating their roles as writers, editors, translators, facilitators, and managers. CLAs work together providing feedback on stories, using readability and lexical tools in their respective languages, and facilitating discussions to develop sensitivity to the levels of language various learners can manage.

Another success came from the many hours CLAs spent writing, translating, and editing stories together. Taking a story set in one culture and then translating it for an audience reading in

another language is very challenging. For instance, the translators had to take into account the complexities of translating the Vietnamese story from English into Japanese. In addition, CLAs also learned to edit efficiently. Part of that process involved rephrasing certain passages and dialogues to make them sound clear and natural. Shortening the length of the stories in both languages was also part of this process. These efforts established the means to align the levels of both English and Japanese texts of one story version, which allows for bilingual exchange discussions with learners of both English and Japanese.

The CLA writers were quite different in their respective writing and creative processes. For example, one writer had an extremely colorful imagination for storytelling, but needed time to develop her voice in narrative prose. She had the relentlessness to write, listen to ideas from others, and then revise and revise again. In contrast, another writer liked to work independently on her story, as she was already very experienced in creative writing. While not needing feedback on story structure, she often sought feedback in one-on-one situations. She also learned how to modify her writing for low intermediate readers. Despite having different levels of proficiency in writing, both writers evidenced increased self-efficacy and ownership of writing in their second language.

Appraisal of the CLA Construct

Learning Objectives for CLAs

To evaluate the best ways CLAs can contribute to collaborative initiatives with communities, the CLA managers and investigators met together and categorized the more general learning goals for CLAs involved in producing multilingual graded readers. So far, the CLA team has identified four learning objectives for Community Literacy Activism through the material development and LC trials (Figure 3).

1. **Second language ownership**
Building self-efficacy in the second language is a key to successful material development. CLAs develop confidence to apply their literary and stylistic awareness as they write, translate, edit, and facilitate discussions about short stories (Fogal, 2015). All members of the CLA team are multilingual. Regardless of their roles in the program, involvement in the different research and development phases should improve members' second language ownership.
2. **Ability to modify language levels in L1 and L2**
The CLA members must communicate with audiences at different proficiency levels in the community, whether in creating graded readers or leading multilingual LCs. Promoting language learning in such a community requires linguistic flexibility to adjust one's L1 and L2 usage according to the audience.
3. **Intercultural communication**
Each CLA member comes from a different background. They must be able to work together toward shared goals while identifying and accepting cultural differences. Also, CLA members engage in promoting language learning with stories having various cultural origins. Understanding intercultural communication is a crucial element in such situations.
4. **Inclusive facilitation skills**
Linguistic and intercultural skills alone are not enough for CLAs to effectively support community members. Facilitation starts from planning a meeting to questioning, listening to, and encouraging participants. These skills increase the chance of successful language learning opportunities.

Promoting language learning through CLA's four learning objectives

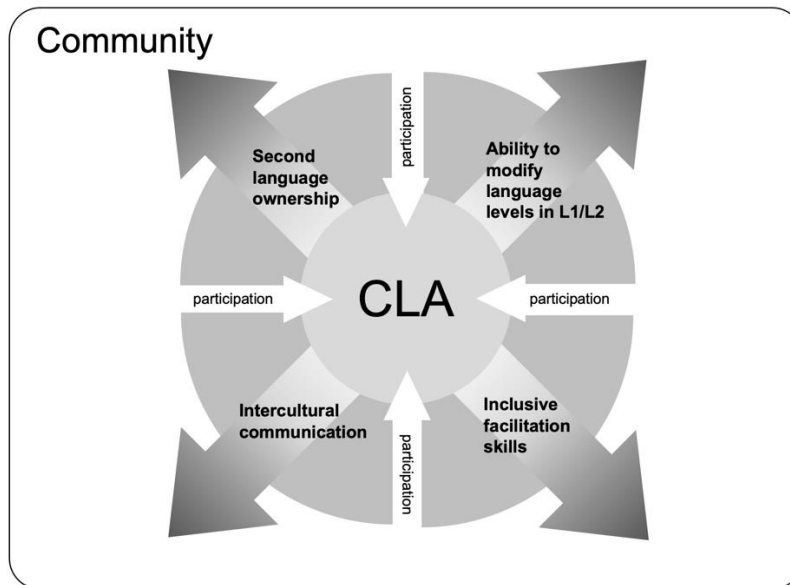


Figure 3. Promoting Language Learning Through CLA's Four Learning Objectives.

Empowering Students beyond Traditional Classroom Settings

Teachers in various places have at times attempted to overcome the lack of ER materials with their students through the inclusion of the writing or translating of graded readers in course syllabi (Rodrigo, 2013; L.B. Sri, personal communication, August 23, 2021). In contrast, for the initiative described in this article, the CLAs were recruited campus wide to serve as student leaders, which suggests that an even larger (international) CLA association might better support the development and translation of graded readers in new languages.

To summarize, the CLA project changes the typical classroom context into a pre-professional, extra-curricular one for student leaders. That is, instead of participating in a class for a grade, students collaborate with teachers on professional material writing, translation, and teaching skills to make new materials for language learners in their community. Such co-creation has been claimed as a precursor to successful citizen science initiatives for education (Roche et al., 2020). Such a space must be intentionally created, according to Paulo Freire (1993):

But the humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. (p. 75)

Further Avenues for CLA Initiatives

Over the next year, the CLAs will be developing facilitation skills through facilitating discussions with English and Japanese learners in their community. As there has yet to be an established methodology for bilingual LC discussion, this process will also be a challenge. Table 1 below summarizes the theoretical elements of Community Literacy Activism and details some further avenues for the development of multilingual graded readers, ER, and other future CLA projects.

Table 1*CLA theory and avenues for future CLA projects*

CLA theory...	CLAs supporting ER...	CLAs could...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • draws inspiration from citizen science, empowering amateurs to participate in multilingual literacy projects. • employs technology to promote collaboration of diverse teams from schools and communities. • validates literacy development initiatives for their own sake while supporting diffusion of innovation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • author original graded readers targeted at multilingual community building. • enrich ER resources in communities where ER has not taken hold. • promote intercultural understanding through ER and LC discussion. • develop skills for multilingual UNESCO story circle leaders (Deardorff, 2020). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • translate resources for community disaster preparation. • translate public signs/ documents. • develop multilingual resources for tourism/ hospitality education. • support needs analysis for curricular planning with the help of alumni. • support activism that moves communities from limited implementation of plain English or <i>yasashi nihongo</i> to a more plurilingual stance (Ito & Tokarev, 2021).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to define Community Literacy Activism as a movement for advancing multilingual literacy in the post-pandemic era. Based on citizen science, such leveraging of Internet technology with CLA networks goes beyond the level of the language classroom to connect students with faculty, alumni, and community members who have common multicultural and multilingual objectives. While still in preliminary stages, our current analysis reveals four general learning objectives for multilingual CLAs: second language ownership, the ability to modify language levels in the L1 and L2, intercultural communication, and inclusive facilitation skills. Such objectives may help to align other collaborations in research or development to validate student participation in these initiatives. There are several limitations to our findings. First, all the authors of this article are insiders in a CLA – ER project. While this may provide detailed qualitative reflections about this ER initiative, the goals identified here may not apply to other literacy initiatives in other contexts. It would be useful for other literacy developers and researchers to report on the alignment of learning objectives with outcomes of other literacy projects. Additionally, there are likely many more granular objectives that could be elucidated for each of the four overarching goals. In conclusion, the evidence from this study suggests CLA initiatives have strong potential for promoting the linguistic expansion of innovations in applied linguistics while simultaneously nurturing multicultural and multilingual leaders and enriching language resources in diverse communities.

Acknowledgements

This project is supported by grant # 20K13154 from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. We are indebted to the faculty and staff of our research office for their wisdom and support. We would also like to thank all the members of the CLA team for their enthusiasm and dedication.

Finally, we would like to thank Erin Walter, who translated our abstract into Spanish, and Susana Ibáñez, for her encouragement to contribute to AJAL.

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