

Magical Tales: Using Stories in the English Language Class

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Introduction

I have always been drawn to the enchanting world of folktales and stories. One of my earliest memories is of the *kamishibai* street storyteller, who came to our neighborhood in Sendai, Japan. In the early 1950s, my family lived in an old clapboard, Western-style house; as I recall, it was built by German professors at Tohoku University before WW II. The dirt road in front of the house was full of potholes, but it didn't much matter because there was rarely any car traffic. Street peddlers came by, each with a distinctive cry, pushing their carts, selling fresh vegetables, tofu, seafood, hot sweet potatoes and in the late evenings, steaming bowls of noodles. Itinerant tradesmen came to the kitchen door of our house offering to sharpen knives and repair umbrellas. For us children the "puffed rice man", who would take our uncooked rice and pop it with a frightening explosion in a big, black revolving drum, and the *kamishibai* storyteller, with a large battered wooden box tied to the back of his bicycle, were the vendors most eagerly awaited.

Down the street from our house there was a small open square at the corner in front of a stately old home, and it was here that the *kamishibai* storyteller would set up shop. From the wooden box on the bicycle he would first take out all sorts of candies and other goodies which he sold to the children gathered about eagerly. If you didn't have the five-yen to spend, you were politely shooed away. The story teller would then pull out one of the dozens of picture stories filed in the box and begin, with great skill and expression, to narrate many strange and wonderful tales to the group of wide-eyed children flocked around his bicycle stage. We children, all quietly sucking and munching on the sticky sweets, were totally captivated by the stories.

In those early post-war days, TV was unheard of, and the *kamishibai*

storyteller was the greatest entertainment a child could hope for. But these stories were not simply entertainment; these tales – with their heroes and villains, with the timeless themes of good against evil and the lessons related to loyalty, hard-work and love – helped to make sense of the often confusing world that children, then as well as now, live in. The tales in some inexplicable way articulated and helped explain the many conflicting and puzzling aspects of life that we, as children, could not really understand.

Although nowadays it is impossible to find the *kamishibai* street storytellers in Japan, stories and folktales continue to have appeal in many new mediums. When you enter the fascinating world of tales you must suspend disbelief and begin a kind of journey back into the time and into the culture where the tales were first told. The ancient art of story telling has always been an important source of entertainment as well as a means of teaching essential life lessons. Oral tales were an important way of handing down the history, culture and beliefs of a social group – thus stories have always served as a teaching tool.

Today, people of all ages still have the capacity, and perhaps the need, to comprehend their world and their lives through stories. Even outside the disciplines of literature and folklore, researchers in the field of narrative psychology suggest that human activities and experiences are filled with meaning, and that stories, rather than logical explanations, are the medium by which that meaning is communicated. It may be that human beings reflect on their own experiences by constructing stories and listening to the stories of others.

Not only do tales have psychological and emotional value, but for the EFL teacher, folktales can also provide an excellent source of authentic material for adaptation to a variety of communicative activities that promote language acquisition. First of all, folktales are often short in length, so a number of tales can be introduced with some depth in a given course. Secondly, folktales are relatively simple, and often very repetitive, thus they are effective as a means of reinforcing vocabulary and language structures without being a dull grammar drill activity. And while folktales may be simple, these tales can have such diverse subject matter it is easy to find something to interest nearly everyone.

While reinforcing the students' basic English language abilities, tales can

also focus on the development of cognitive and academic skills. Through tales, analytic skills such as critical thinking, summarizing and detecting inference clues can be introduced. Because tales can be read on many different levels, there is no single correct way to analyze the motifs and the meaning of tales. Thus students can more easily explore the range of possible interpretations, evaluate the universal "moral lessons" of a tale and consider diverse symbolic meanings of the motifs and story line. While tales can be studied as a form of literature, they can also be used to introduce students to history, religion, sociology and anthropology. Every culture has its own collection of tales, thus folktales lend themselves to the exploration of cultural differences and similarities. Using folktales in the language class in an interdisciplinary context, combined with communicative approaches to language teaching, fits well with the growing pedagogical emphasis on content-based instruction (Taylor, 2000).

This paper is in two sections. In the first section I would like to introduce some activities based on the use of folktales and other short narratives. These activities, which I have used over the years in a number of different courses at Japanese universities, can improve students' language competence, enhance students' cognitive abilities as well as contribute to their confidence in regards to English. Some of these activities are for beginning-level students, while other activities are better suited for students who are more proficient in English, and who have greater self-assurance in their ability to express themselves in English. In the second section, I will discuss how activities designed around short narratives, such as folktales, can meet the needs of college students in their transition from secondary school English classes, where classes are more teacher-centered and test-oriented, to those at the university level, where student-centered approaches are more feasible and assessment can be more holistic.

I cannot claim to being the originator of these activities; in most cases it is impossible to acknowledge exact sources of teaching ideas. I have collected these ideas from numerous workshops, presentations and teacher resources – and then, much like the way folktales evolve over time – I have adapted, modified and expanded these activities to fit the continually changing needs of students who have been in my courses. Other teachers wanting to use these kinds of activities will adapt them to suit their needs as well. Even

though it is not possible for me to cite specific sources for these activities, I would nevertheless like to express my gratitude to the countless teachers who have shared their ideas through books, conferences workshops and presentations, as well as to all the educators who provide innumerable teaching ideas and resources on the Internet.

PART ONE A: Activities

1 . Timeline Activity

Group size: 10 – 20 seems to work best

Class level: High beginner to advanced

Time: Approximately 30 – 40 minutes

Materials: A folktale to read to the class, large pieces of paper, markers.

Objectives: To help students improve listening comprehension skills, to introduce new vocabulary and reinforce time order words; then to have students retell the story.

Preparation: Select a folktale that is appropriate in terms of level and interest for the class. Make note of any words or phrases that may be unfamiliar to the students.

In class:

- 1 . Explain what a timeline is by illustrating on the board. You can use important events in your life, such as when you were born, when you started school and so on. You can also create a time line based on the life of one of the students. This might involve the instructor or other class members interviewing a student and making a timeline on the board based on events in that student's life.

- 2 . Introduce words that may be unfamiliar to students.

- 3 . Give each student a sheet of paper and some markers.

- 4 . Read or tell the story; as students listen they create a timeline based on the story. This can either be done in words or phrases along the timeline or, since many students enjoy illustrating, they can also make quick sketches of the main events of the story. You may need to read or tell the story more than once and pause occasionally to allow students time to write and draw.

- 5 . Allow students to compare their timelines and ask for repetition or clarification as needed.

- 6 . Divide students into groups of 3 to 4, and in each group the story is

retold with each person telling a section of the story in turn. Students use their timelines as prompts for the retelling. Students can also consolidate their notes to in order to create a more complete version of the story,

7 . Select one or two of the groups to present their version of the story to the whole class.

NOTE: Instead of giving each person a sheet of paper to write the timeline on, this activity can also be done collaboratively in pairs or small groups. The drawing and writing work can then be divided according to students' interests or skills – some may prefer writing words, others may prefer drawing, while other students may want to focus on listening and recalling the events of the story.

2 . Story Strips Activity

Class level: Beginner to Low Intermediate

Group size: Any size; students work in pairs.

Time: 15 – 30 minutes

Objectives: Listening comprehension skills, reading and ordering events, remembering details, learning vocabulary, practicing speaking through retelling the story.

Preparation: Select a relatively short tale appropriate to the level and interests of the class. Summarize the main points of the story in 10 – 15 sentences. Write these sentences in random order on paper, leaving space between each sentence or section. Make enough copies for each pair of students in the class.

In class:

1 . Tell or read the complete folktale (not the summarized version prepared in advance) to the students. Explain any unfamiliar vocabulary as needed. Encourage students to listen for the main events in the plot of the story. Students should also listen for additional details of the story.

2 . Hand out copies the summarized, randomly ordered version of the story. Students can work in pairs or in groups of three or four. Ask students to read through the sentences and arrange them in order. This can be done either by having the students number the sentences on the page or having them cut up the strips of sentences and arrange them on their desks. Students collaborate in recalling details of the story to add to the plot summary.

3 . Circulate among students and when they are finished, ask them to read their story summary to you to make sure the story has been arranged correctly. Students who finish earlier than others can assist others.

4 . When all the students are finished, one student from each pair or group should be selected to re-tell the story. This student should retell the story without looking at the written version while other group members can prompt or offer assistance as needed. It is important for students to remember and add details to the story that may not be included in the summarized written versions.

NOTE: Another variation on this activity is to write a summary of the story in sections corresponding to the number of students in a class or number of students in a group. For instance, if you have a class of 15 students, divide and write the story summary into 15 segments. Cut up the sections and in class randomly pass out one segment to each student. Tell students to memorize their segment, if possible. Then students should go around the class telling their segment to other class members. The goal is for students to arrange themselves in the correct order and then each person tells his or her section. In order to keep students actively using English it is helpful to introduce language strategies for students to use while they mingle with other class members. For example, demonstrating and teaching sentences such as "I think my section is at the beginning of the story" or "I think your section is after mine" can help students use English to confer with each other and arrange themselves appropriately.

3 . Folktale Comparison Activity

Class level: Intermediate to advanced.

Class size: 12 – 20, perhaps larger

Objectives: Integrated language practice, note-taking, skills of comparing and contrasting, critical thinking and evaluating, connecting literature and culture.

Class time: 60 – 90 minutes, not including homework.

Preparation: Find 3 to 5 variations, depending on the size of your class, of the same folktale. Prepare an "elements of a story" chart with sections for setting, characters, conflict or goal, resolution of conflict, theme or message and cultural notes. Students will fill in this chart later as they compare their

different stories.

In class:

1 . Introduce the story by reading aloud a familiar version of the story. It is sometimes helpful to find an illustrated children's book of the story and show the pictures as you read. (When introducing the "Cinderella type" story I used a picture book of the familiar Disney version.)

2 . Divide the students into groups depending on class size and the number of story variants being used. For instance if you have a class of 12 students divide the class in four groups and give each member of that group the same variant of a story. Three students will have story A, three will have story B and so on.

3 . Ask the members of each group to work together in reading its story, going over important vocabulary and confirming their understanding of the story.

4 . As homework students are asked to familiarize themselves with their version of the story and prepare a timeline (see above) and vocabulary notes.

5 . In the next class allow students to work together in their original groups to practice retelling their version of the story and coaching each other. Then make new groups of students; groups should now be made of students with different versions of the story. Using the timelines and vocabulary notes, each member of the group should tell (not read) their version of the story.

6 . After the different versions have been told, students work together to fill in the "story elements" chart to compare similarities and differences in the stories; they can compare setting, characters, conflict, motifs and the resolution of the conflict. Students can also be encouraged to consider aspects of the different cultures that are evident in the variants of the tales.

NOTE: For this activity I have used different versions of the Cinderella tale (Type 510A in Aarne-Thompson's classification of folktale types): Komebukuro, Awabukuro, a Japanese tale; The Wicked Stepmother, a Kashmiri tale; The Story of the Black Cow, a Himalayan tale; The Story of Tam and Cam, a Vietnamese tale; and Mi'kmaq Indian Cinderella and the Invisible One, a Native American tale. There are numerous other tales that one could select.

4 . Activity to Create the Story of a Ballad

Class level: Any level depending on the ballad selected.

Class Size: 10-20 works best

Objectives: Listening comprehension. Creating stories based on the lyrics and background information of a ballad. Speaking and presentation practice. Cultural exploration.

Class time: This could be a quick 15 to 30 minute warm up activity at the beginning of a class, or can be developed into longer project and presentation activity.

Preparation: Select any ballad that might lend itself to creating a story line and prepare lyrics and music tape or CD. I have used traditional ballads such as the "Scarborough Fair Canticle," "Willy o' the Winsbury," and "House Carpenter." A number of different artists have made recordings of these traditional ballads. More contemporary ballads could be selected as well.

In Class:

1 . There are any number of ways that the ballad could be introduced in class. It could be introduced with a cloze activity, which involves students filling in missing words as they listen to the song. Alternatively, the lyrics can be prepared and cut into strips that students can arrange in correct order while listening.

2 . After the ballad lyrics have been arranged in order, any vocabulary terms and cultural concepts can be introduced.

3 . Students then can recreate the story from the information given in the ballad. Students should be encouraged to imaginatively enhance the story by adding details and other information to the basic story provided in the ballad lyrics. Although the basic story line from the ballad may be the same, the different pairs and groups may be adding different details; thus each version will be different. This can be done in small groups or in pairs and these stories could be written if class time allows.

4 . Finally each pair or group might tell their versions to the whole class. Students could be encouraged to use common story telling phrases such as "Once there was..." or "Long, long ago... "

NOTE: This kind of activity can become a broader interdisciplinary project. When working with the "Scarborough Fair Canticle" my students did

background research into the seaport town of Scarborough in England. They followed this by investigating the history of the three herbs mentioned in this ballad – parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme – and discovered that these herbs had symbolic meanings pertinent to the lyrics of the ballad. Students then decided they wanted to learn more about herbs in general, so each student selected one herb, did background research to learn about the medicinal qualities, the history as well as the symbolism of the herb and then gave presentations to the class. The college had a small herb garden so students were able to pick and use herbs in their presentations; one student prepared herb tea for class members while another student prepared rosemary scones. These presentations often involved cultural comparisons, because many similar herbs have also been used in Japan for their traditional healing qualities.

PART ONE B. Projects and Presentations

Folktales, legends and myths also lend themselves to student activities related to projects and presentations. The following two activities are designed to help students use English in the process of doing background research, planning presentations, preparing appropriate handouts and visual aides and finally in doing class presentations and discussions. Depending on the activity, presentations can be done individually, in pairs, or in small groups. I have found that presentation projects work best when done toward the end of a course, as a final assignment. Presentation projects are most successful when students feel comfortable as a group, when supportive class dynamics have been established and previous class activities have encouraged students to be more self-directed and motivated about using English.

Developing Presentation Skills

Most Japanese students, prior to coming to university, have had very little experience with doing class presentations. Needless to say, doing one in English can be rather intimidating. There are a number of ways to help students build up to the final presentation project. As one example, particularly in smaller classes, a short "show and tell" activity could be done at the start of each class. The idea of "show and tell" – an activity that most children in the United States are very familiar with – can be initially

explained and demonstrated by the teacher. Each student is asked to bring in a small object or photo to class and to introduce the background and importance of the object to members of the class. This activity can be done on a rotational basis with class members being assigned days when it will be their turn to do their "show and tell." The "show and tell" mini-speech is very short, but it is a good opportunity for students to practice effective techniques such as eye contact, voice projection and strategies for introducing and concluding a speech. The listeners can also be encouraged to ask questions and comment. I have found that one or two students doing a "show and tell" at the beginning of class is often a good warm-up for other class activities. The text *Getting Ready for Speech: A Beginner's Guide to Public Speaking* (LeBeau & Harrington, 2002) suggests other activities which can help students prepare for presentations in English.

Promoting Active Listening

One of the challenges when incorporating student presentations as part of course work is to find ways to keep the class audience actively engaged in listening to the presentations of other students. I have found that "audience" members of the class do not always pay attention to other presentations; they are busy furtively getting ready for their own time to present, or if they have already presented, they tend to "tune out" and seem inattentive.

In order to keep the "audience" on task it helps to prepare a Presentation Evaluation Form, which is collected at the end of each presentation. On this form students fill in information about the title of the presentation, the presenter's name and write a numerical score to evaluate the presentation. Students use the numerical score to evaluate presentation style (voice, eye contact, gestures), research and background information, handouts and visual aids, organization (introduction, transitions and conclusion). Another section of the form can be a space for students to make note of any vocabulary and a section to write questions or comments. Although I do not rely on the students' Presentation Evaluation Forms when preparing student grades, the forms do provide interesting insights into how students observe and judge each other. Their comments and observations are often surprising; students frequently notice things about their classmates' presentations that I had not noted.

At the end of each presentation, time is allowed for questions and

comments. I have found that it helps to "require" each student in the audience to ask a question or make a comment about the presentation. During this time the listeners can also ask for repetition or clarification of parts of the presentation. Initially this Q and A time after each presentation seemed a little forced; however, once students became accustomed to this time set aside for exchanging ideas and commenting, in many ways the post presentation discussions become the most stimulating part of these presentation projects. Students often were exchanging ideas and offering comments, in English, very spontaneously and unconsciously.

5 . Activity in Presenting Myths from Different Cultures

Class Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Group size: 10 –20 is ideal

Time: Considerable time is spent outside of class doing background research. Students can be given time in class to do final preparations for their presentations.

Objectives: To find and compare myths from various cultures which are based on a particular theme. To work in groups with specific research tasks given to each member of the group. To do background research, prepare handouts and visual aides, to be able to introduce important vocabulary and cultural information. To develop presentation skills and active listening skills.

Preparation: Before students begin their own research into comparative myths, it is useful do an activity as a class comparing similar myths from different cultures. For instance, various myths related to how humans obtained fire could be introduced using activities mentioned earlier. The text *Voices in Literature, Silver* (McCloskey & Stack, 1993) includes three myths related to this topic: "The Fire Stealer," an Ojibwa story, "Prometheus, " the Greek myth and "How the Mayans Got Fire and Fooled Their Enemies," a Mayan myth.

The next step is to select a certain mythic theme to explore. As an example, nearly every culture seems to have a creation story, so the focus of these presentations could be to compare different creation myths. Students themselves then select which country's or culture's myths they want to study. Students can work in groups based on their interests – for instance one group

may be interested in the Japanese creation myth, others in the Ainu creation myth, others in the Chinese creation myth, others in the Iranian creation myth and others in the Biblical creation myth. Students could also choose to do this as an individual project.

In class: Much of the preparation for these presentations is done outside of class, as homework. However, some class time should be set aside to allow group members to plan their presentations and divide the different tasks involved, such as doing research, making an outline, introducing the pertinent vocabulary, creating handouts and creating visual aides. Before students actually do their presentations it is helpful give students time in class to practice their presentations in their separate groups before they do the presentation in front of the whole class. Students do their final presentations in front of the whole class.

6 . Activity to Discover and Present a Local Story

Class level: Intermediate to Advanced

Time: Depends on class size. Each presentation is about 10 to 15 minutes. Outside of class, students will spend a considerable amount of time gathering information, doing background research and preparing handouts and visual aides.

Objectives: To help students become aware of the stories, legends and history of their own hometowns and communities. To encourage students to do background research and introduce these stories in English to the rest of the class. To help students develop presentation skills in English.

Materials: Depending on the subject of their presentations, students may prepare a variety of things such as photos, posters, pamphlets, maps, and newspaper articles, as well as interview notes and recordings.

Preparation: An important step in the preparation process for this kind of presentation project is to help students become aware of stories and history that are part of the background for many of the local shrines, temples, *jizo* statues and other stone monuments that dot the Japanese landscape. More often than not, I have found that students are unaware of these curious, tucked away places right in their own neighborhoods.

As a way of introducing this activity and helping students become more aware of their surroundings, I have found it valuable to go on a field trip

with the class to Houshaku-in, a temple near our campus. On this field trip students are given a task sheet, which they are to fill out as they explore the temple. On this sheet they are to make notes of any writing on stone monuments, statues, explanations given on signboards and buildings. Students are also asked to think of and list the questions that they might be asked if they were to show this temple to a visitor from outside of Japan. It is important that they just consider the questions – they do not need to know the answers. After returning to the classroom students are given time to compare and consolidate their notes.

As is true for many landmarks; there is a story behind the existence of this temple: the local legend of Yuriwaka-maru and his faithful hawk Midori-maru. There are also historical connections to this temple: Mizoguchi Hidekatsukou, the feudal lord of Shibata territory, was so moved by the legend of Midori-maru that he had a temple built for the *kannon* at the site of Midori-maru's grave.

This kind of story exploration helps students see the connection between geographical places, legends, and history. Students can also reflect on cultural comparisons, such as the similarities between statues of the *kannon* bodhisattva and statues of the Virgin Mary. Students might then discuss whether or not a legend of this type is based on truth. And if the tale is not true, why then, has the tale lasted over time? This leads to a discussion of the universality of themes in stories; students may also consider some of the similarities and differences in the religious ideas of differing cultures. Through this kind of field trip activity, students become aware that there are stories behind even insignificant little temples, shrines and monuments and with this realization, they are better able to discover the local stories in their own communities. Students become curious about their own culture and are motivated to use English to explain and discuss these stories.

Their next task, then, is to go and discover their own local story. Students can choose whether to do this in pairs or small groups, but in my classes students have always chosen to do this as individual projects. Before summer vacation students are given some presentation guidelines and are instructed to find some place, either famous or not so well known, in their local area to begin investigating. During the summer, students should collect pamphlets, take photos, get information from books and websites or conduct

interviews with people who know the history of the place.

Students are also given the suggested outline, below, for their presentation.

1 . Introduction: The name and location of the place. Reason for choosing the particular place. Explanation of vocabulary, on the board or in a handout given to each member of the class.

2 . Main part of the presentation: Explain the background or history of the place. Describe the place. Use visual aides such as photos, maps, charts and drawings. If there is a story connected to the place, tell the story.

3 . Allow time for questions and comments from the rest of the class.

4 . Summarize: At the end of the presentation, review main points and talk about your own impressions of the place.

In class:

After students have selected their presentation topics, but before they actually do their presentations, I have used some class time for conferencing with individual students. During conferencing students can show me the materials they have gathered, discuss how they want to proceed with their presentations and get help with any questions or problems. Suggestions for making effective visual aides and handouts can also be discussed.

In a class of about 15 students, I have found it best to have just one to three students do their presentations at the beginning of a 90-minute class, with the rest of class time spent on other course work. With just one to three presentations per class, the "audience" can be more attentive and take more time in actively asking questions and making comments. Having presentations over a period of time also offers more flexibility to the student presenters, giving them a chance to choose a presentation date that works in best around their personal schedules and also gives them adequate time to prepare visual aides and hand-outs.

Note: Over the years students have done remarkable presentations. Some choosing to tell the stories connected to fairly well-known sites in Niigata such as Hakusan Shrine, Gokoku Shrine and Yahiko Shrine. In their research of even these more famous places, students have discovered strange and little-known stories, such as the "baba sugi" tale – the legend of the ogress who ate human corpses – associated with Yahiko Shrine. Other students have done presentations on "the Seven Wonders of Echigo," Ryokan, and on

the origins of some local festivals, just to mention a few of the wonderful places and stories which are a part of their culture that students have "discovered."

PART TWO: Folktales and Communicative Language Teaching

In the following section I hope to illustrate how the use of activities designed around authentic short narratives can be an effective means if combining content-based instruction with a communicative approach English language learning. Activities such as these can encourage students to engage in tasks that reinforce language skills, encourage critical thinking, as well as add to students' confidence in their ability to communicate and express their ideas in English. While not based on any one language teaching theory, the activities integrate ideas from a number of language learning approaches; by using activities like this the instructor can create a supportive and non-threatening learning environment for students who in many cases have not had opportunity to really acquire communicative English skills in their middle and high school classes. These activities can be an effective way of helping university level students make the transition from their secondary learning experiences, which so often focused on teacher-centered approaches and rote learning tasks, to the kind of classroom interactions expected of them in the college and university educational environment, where students are often encouraged to express opinions and be active participants in the learning process.

EFL educators at Japanese universities have many questions in regards to how to create an optimum learning atmosphere for students who have come through the typical six years of English instruction at secondary schools. How can English be made accessible as well as enjoyable to students who may not have had such positive experiences in English prior to coming to college? How can we help students, who often have low self-esteem about their abilities in English, gain confidence and feel successful? How can students, who are not accustomed to expressing opinions and exchanging ideas, become comfortable in classrooms where this kind of interaction is a significant part of class work? How can we encourage cooperative learning so that students do not feel they are in competition with each other? What role does the teacher play in classrooms where we want the learning process

to be more student-centered?

On the other hand, it may be that many of these questions and expectations that EFL teachers have are based on Western ideas and assumptions about learning and language acquisition which may not be appropriate or readily applicable to the Japanese educational and socio-cultural environment. What is effective teaching methodology, or "best practice," when it comes to the Japanese educational environment, particularly at the tertiary level?

In the United States, "best practice" is a term that is widely used in many educational settings. Although the exact meaning of this term may be imprecise, many educators believe that there are a distinct set of research-based classroom practices which constitutes "best practice." According to these researchers, there is a consensus among teachers in all subject areas and at all grade levels; they recommend classrooms that are student-centered, experiential, reflective, authentic, holistic, social, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, constructivist, and challenging (Daniels & Bizar, 2004). While these ideas related to learning and teaching are not new – they are part of the American tradition of "progressive" education – it is not always easy for teachers to implement these concepts in their day-to-day teaching. In order to facilitate this process Daniels and Bizar suggest six process-oriented basic structures, or teaching methods, which can be applied to all grades and all subject areas. They call these methods Integrative Units, Small Group Activities, Representing-to-Learn, Classroom Workshop, Authentic Experiences and Reflective Assessment. For those of us teaching EFL in Japan are these practices applicable to the educational environment here? What is "best practice" in English education in Japan? Are the kinds of teaching methods that are advocated in the US, or in other ESL environments, applicable to language learners in Japan?

In recent years there have been top-down attempts to reform English education and improve teaching methodology in Japan. In the 1980s the Monbukagakusho (the National Ministry of Education, Science and Culture) came out with new guidelines for middle and high school English language classes. These guidelines emphasize the importance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) activities in the classroom. However, my observation has been that when CLT is applied to English classes at the

secondary level in Japan – classes which are often too large, classes where there is pressure to "teach to the test" and where many of the over-worked Japanese teachers of English lack confidence in their own communicative competence in the target language – this "reform" has not been particularly impressive. Furthermore, in many secondary schools it is the occasional visit from the native-speaker ALT that brings a bit of communicative activity into the class. This seems to reinforce the unfortunate idea that only native speaker teachers have the skills needed for CLT activities. I am not sure that this is a positive image, or role model, for either the students or the Japanese teacher of English.

The pedagogy of CLT, though interpreted in a variety of ways, focuses primarily on the following: the importance of communicating meaning—rather than accuracy; communicative functions based on learner needs; use of authentic tasks and authentic materials; a learner-centered perspective; a class atmosphere that is comfortable and non-threatening; and learning activities that center around pair and group work. Many in the EFL field in Japan are questioning whether CLT, with pedagogies based largely on native-speaker norms and a more Western-style educational value system, can be readily applied to middle and high school English curricula. Does CLT meet the real needs of students and teachers at the secondary level in Japan?

Educators with experience in Japan are suggesting a paradigm shift in English classes at the secondary level. They point out that while many Japanese learners may not have the immediate necessity to master communicative skills in English, they do need English to be prepared for global communication in the future. It is helpful to introduce English as a lingua franca that does not belong exclusively to native speakers, thus the emphasis of English classes at the secondary level should be on an international communicative competence model, or English as an International Language (EIL). To meet this objective it is suggested that CLT, when applied to secondary English education in Japan, should be adapted in a culturally sensitive way. These researchers propose the following ideas: rather than the native speaker model, the bilingual Japanese teacher is a better role model for learners; the teaching of grammar should be integrated with a communicative syllabi; materials should reflect the

learners' culture, the target culture, as well as international culture; and Japanese teachers of English should use both languages judiciously and proportionately, depending on the learners' proficiency levels (Samimy and Kobayashi, 2004).

What then, are the implications of CLT pedagogies for English teachers, native speaker as well as non-native speaker, at the university level in Japan? Most of the problems that secondary school teachers have when trying to implement CLT do not exist in university environments. Our classes are generally smaller; we do not have to teach "*juken eigo*" for entrance exams; we can encourage communication for meaning and fluency, rather than accuracy; and it is easier for us to assess students in more holistic ways. Many university teachers in Japan, in all subject areas, would like to turn to more innovative, learner-centered teaching approaches which encourage students to think critically and to actively participate in class. In many ways the task of teachers at the tertiary level is to "re-train" students; to help students acquire a different learning modality and encourage students to focus more on the process of learning and not just the content. The socio-educational environment at universities is not the same as at middle and high schools and it is important for university teachers to create a variety of classroom tasks that will help our students bridge the gap from their learning experiences at secondary school to what they encounter at university.

While they may not be considered sufficiently academic, folktales and other simple narratives lend themselves very well to the creation of these kinds of tasks. People are naturally drawn to stories; the language in folktales is accessible and the content is enjoyable. The simplicity and repetitive nature of folktales make them approachable and can reinforce target language skills. And because the language is simple, students do not need to resort to the use of their first language when dealing with the content. Folktales can encourage the processes of critical thinking because students can explore possible interpretations without too much difficulty. Additionally, activities which draw upon a variety of pedagogical approaches, can be designed around folktales and stories.

Activities which make use of folktales can integrate many of Krashen's theories of language acquisition. Krashen suggests that "language input" be one step beyond the learner's current level of competence; that acquisition

takes place when the learner is exposed to "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1987). Folktales generally meet this requirement. The main story lines and themes of the tales are familiar and easy for students to understand, while at the same time the tales introduce students to new linguistic structures and vocabulary. Krashen also emphasizes the importance of "affective variables"; students with high motivation, self-confidence and a low level of anxiety can have more success in language acquisition. Folktales lend themselves to the implementation of a variety of interactive tasks, which create a comfortable classroom environment and can thus help students gain confidence and feel less anxious about using the target language.

Tasks based on folktales can also incorporate some of Gardner's concepts of "multiple intelligences" as well as Kagan's ideas related to cooperative learning. Gardner has identified many kinds of intelligence such as interpersonal, intrapersonal, musical, linguistic, kinesthetic and others; according to Gardner, the students' various natural talents need to be equally appreciated and incorporated into the learning environment (Gardner, 1993). Kagan's ideas on cooperative learning and his PIES concepts – (P) positive interdependence; (I) individual accountability; (E) equal participation; and (S) simultaneous interaction – can also be built-in when designing activities around tales. (Kagan, 1994). In developing tasks around folktales, the EFL teacher is able support and make use of varying student intelligences and talents. Rather than a competitive classroom environment, class activities based on folktales can encourage positive cooperation and create a mutually supportive environment. This kind of learning environment is much like the social, collaborative and democratic classroom advocated in the concepts of "best practice."

My experience has been that these various activities designed around folktales and other short narratives can have a positive impact on the group dynamics of a class. As the classroom dynamics evolve, the teacher takes on a variety of roles in the classroom. Initially the teacher needs to take a stronger leadership role in setting up activities, giving directions and setting goals. However, as members of the class have increasing rapport with each other and the teacher, and as the class group becomes more cohesive and more self-regulated, the teacher's role can change. The teacher can become more democratic and more transformational – more of a facilitator and

advisor (Dornyei & Murphey, 2003). Thus during a course, class activities move from controlled, to guided and then to more spontaneous. When this happens, the learning process becomes more student-centered and there is more learner autonomy. Students achieve the confidence and the competence to make many choices themselves, not only about many aspects of the learning process but also in assessing themselves and others in the class. This process again draws on some of the ideas related to holistic and reflective assessment mentioned as a component of "best practice."

Perhaps the biggest appeal of activities built around folktales is that while they provide a medium for content-based instruction, and can familiarize students with critical thinking skills, the tasks involved in these activities provide students with ample opportunities to use and reinforce their English skills as well. For most English learners in Japan the classroom is the only place where they have an opportunity to really use and develop their English language capabilities. No matter what teaching approach is used, language learners need regular opportunities to apply what they are learning. While content-based instruction is indeed important, EFL teachers should be concerned if students become too dependent on using their first language in the process of accomplishing tasks for the class; in that case it is reasonable to conclude that the content is inappropriate for the students' language development. If using L1 becomes habitual among students, inside and outside the classroom, students who do want to use English may lose motivation because of the prevailing group culture of the class. Part of the EFL teacher's responsibility in implementing content-based instruction is to provide students with *optimum meaningful input through content* so they can develop *adequate use of the target language*. It seems to me that this combination is essential.

In recent years there has been an increasing awareness among EFL teachers that there is no single top-down teaching approach or best way of learning a foreign language. Instead, teachers are reflecting on their teaching practices and realizing that bottom-up approaches – from observations within the classroom itself – can help identify principles of effective teaching. As EFL teachers it is imperative for us to be aware of our students' needs, their interests, and their goals for learning English. We need to design and develop activities and materials, which, in a culturally sensitive way,

provide students with incentive to use and develop their language skills without the constant fear of failure or incompetence. Classrooms which include these kinds of activities are student-centered, collaborative, experiential, reflective, authentic and holistic; at the university level these are the significant elements of "best practice" in teaching.

There have been occasions in my classes, while students were discussing or exchanging ideas about their presentations, when I stood aside and just watched them interacting with each other, all in English – expressing opinions, listening and learning from each other. Students seemed almost unconscious of the fact that they were continually using English and were amazed themselves, when the class bell rang and their discussions were interrupted. It is rewarding to watch students take ownership of their own learning process like this; to see them gain confidence and gain a feeling of success in their ability to communicate in English. Curiously, one of my students recently mentioned that she felt she could express her opinions more readily in English than in Japanese. From a socio-cultural perspective this is perhaps understandable, but nevertheless it was an unanticipated comment. Language learning seems to be a cyclical process: accessible tasks lead to confidence, confidence leads to success, success leads to competence, and competence leads to motivation – students are then prepared to develop their *own* tasks and goals in their *own* language acquisition process. When students become aware of being genuinely successful due to their own growth, they then become motivated to learn for intrinsic reasons as opposed to extrinsic. For me as a teacher, communicative tasks designed around short narratives such as folktales have provided this "magic."

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