

## **Introducing nursery rhymes into public elementary school English activities**

OHBA Ayako

Graduate student (05003CAM)

### **Abstract**

In accordance with the MEXT policy that emphasizes the importance of English abilities, Japanese public elementary schools carry out English activities. To successfully take part in intercultural communication, a positive attitude towards different ideas and situations is essential. With nursery rhymes, Japanese students will gain greater cultural awareness by encountering unfamiliar ideas and behaviors. Results from a workshop using nursery rhymes are presented to support the discussion.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to determine if nursery rhymes can be used as effective teaching material in Japanese elementary school English activities. In the following discussion, I will review the MEXT policy of English education and situations surrounding the elementary school English activities. I then discuss the importance of acquiring cultural awareness and knowledge of other cultures for successful intercultural communication. For that purpose nursery rhymes present various situations of life and people's reactions in a ways that children can familiarize with. The results of the workshop to support my hypothesis are also discussed.

### **1. MEXT policy of English education**

In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) launched a far-reaching change of the English education program by announcing A Strategic Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities.' The plan was implemented in accordance with the policy of the new Course of Study (1998). It emphasizes that young Japanese who grow up to live and work in a more globalized society need to have effective communication skills so that they can interact smoothly with people from different cultures. The plan also holds specific goals, giving target levels of English proficiency tests to be achieved by English learners. To obtain results from the Strategic Plan in five years, MEXT issued an Action Plan (2003a, 2003b) which included various methods of teaching English and instructed the English teachers at all levels of education to shift from lessons composed of grammar, translation and repetition drills to enhancement of students' communication skills. The Action Plan was significant in two points: (1) it encouraged local education boards to hire

native English speakers as assistant language teachers (ALTs), and (2) it enabled public elementary schools to carry out English conversation activities during the Period for Integrated Studies.

## **2. English activities in elementary schools**

Public elementary schools started to hold the English activities in 2002. According to a MEXT survey, the English activities were carried out at 93.6% of all public elementary schools in 2005 (MEXT, 2006). Since the activities are carried out as part of the International Understanding Class, not as compulsory subject, the contents of the activities are “not fixed. It can be said that teachers are required to devise both contents and activities” (MEXT, 2001). Various problems regarding the English activities are pointed out, but the most serious is that elementary school teachers, who have received no formal training for English language teaching, are not confident of their abilities to construct and implement meaningful activities (Jidou, 2006).

MEXT reported that the most popular activities are sing-songs, games, English conversation practices, and cultural experiences, such as Halloween trick-or-treating (MEXT, 2006). However, there are criticisms of these cultural experiences in that the activities provide only a quasi-experience of the culture of English-speaking societies (Gordon, 2004). We must remember that the new Courses of Study emphasizes that teachers should enhance the students’ practical communication skills by strengthening the ability to understand information and the other party’s meanings and to express one’s own thoughts (MEXT, 2003c). The ministry also points out the importance of cultivating tolerance of different cultures, recognition of differences in cultures, and an attitude to act upon such knowledge towards different cultures. Thus, elementary teachers should focus on encouraging students to learn how to respond to new ideas and situations when they are in intercultural communication. How, then, can these attitudes toward different cultures be cultivated?

## **3. Importance of cultural awareness and knowledge in intercultural communication**

To interact successfully with people from varying cultural backgrounds, one needs to be tolerant toward different cultures. For this purpose, cultural awareness plays an important role. We must first realize that our ideas and behaviors are influenced by our culture. Being aware of other cultures and cultural influences, learners will start to look at things from different perspectives, which is essential for successful intercultural communication. Knowledge and understanding of other cultures is as important as knowledge of the language itself, for any language embodies the culture of the society where it is spoken. How, then, will learners of foreign language cultivate and enhance cultural awareness?

Yashima (2003) studied 139 Japanese high school students (94 female and 45 male) who had spent a year in the U.S. studying and living with local host families, and analyzed what communication problems they encountered. I use one of the cases, experienced by a male student (hereby called Student A), as a good example of how someone acquires cultural awareness and utilizes it to interact with people. Following is a chart of this process:

- (1) Being exposed to new situations: Student A feels that the relationship with his host family has become strained, but he does not know why.  
↓
- (2) Recognition of cultural differences: He notices that people around him in the U. S. say “please” when asking for a favor.  
↓
- (3) Reflection on one’s own ideas and recognition of cultural influences upon oneself: Student A realizes that in Japan he does not usually say “please” or “thank you” when asking something from his family.  
↓
- (4) Recognition of cultural influences on other people’s thoughts and behaviors: Student A realizes that in order to keep good relationships with Americans, he should say “please” even if it was not his custom in Japan.  
↓
- (5) Finding a solution for successful communication: Student A’s host family welcomes his improved manners and their relationships ameliorate.

For Student A, the comfort of his stay with his host family was at stake when he found his solutions. His problem was that although the word “please” and its usage is taught in junior high school English class, he had not learned the importance of the word in real life situations of English-speaking societies until he came to stay in the U. S. If foreign language learners receive trainings to acquire cultural awareness and cultural knowledge of the societies where the language is spoken, such problems will decrease in number.

As we interact with people from different cultural backgrounds, there are times when we stop and think “What does he mean?” “What are implications of her speech?” or “How should I respond?” If we have knowledge of certain situations from similar experiences, we can draw them up from our memory bank to cope with new situations. According to Schema theory, sets of such memories are called schemata. Schema is, according to Miller (2005), a template in our sense-making process to understand the social world. The role of schemata is to provide ways of organizing new information and a guide for understanding and interaction

with others. In order to interact with people from a certain cultural background, it is important to possess cultural schemata of that society so that we know what to expect. Therefore, acquisition of cultural knowledge of the language one studies helps smooth communication with native speakers of the language.

#### **4. Importance of nursery rhymes**

Byram (1997) argues that English learners can expand their own cultural awareness by learning about the cultural heritage of English speaking peoples. When examining the cultural heritage of English speaking peoples, we should notice the important role of nursery rhymes in their everyday life. We see and hear words, lines, and images of famous nursery rhymes and their characters on various media, entertainment programs, and literature. Passed on since the European Middle Ages, more than 1,000 rhymes have been collected. There are rhymes which are said to caricaturize authority, as well as certain political and social situations. Many have lost their original meanings, but are still used as anecdotes and warnings. For children, nursery rhymes are sung as lullabies to very young children. As they grow, they sing and dance along to the rhymes. Short and simple, nursery rhymes provide simple storylines rich with silly and sometimes grotesque characters. Children learn the basic form of the English language through singing and dancing along to the rhymes while having indirect experience of the world. The rhymes also teach readers how to react to various situations of life.

#### **5. Hypothesis**

Drawing on the above discussion, I believe that nursery rhymes can be used as effective teaching material in Japanese elementary school English activities. As young Japanese learners look at the varied behaviors of nursery rhyme characters, they will be able to recognize the differences and compare them with their own behaviors. Through related activities, teachers may guide students to recognize similarities and differences between ideas and behaviors across cultures, to exchange ideas about them, and to defend their own point of view while acknowledging and accepting differences. Children will also learn various situations of life and how the people cope with them. There are other advantages of learning nursery rhymes. Learners will be exposed to: (1) short and easy-to-remember rhymes, (2) rhythm and sounds of English, and (3) basic structure of the English language. Experiencing the diversity of cultures, the learners will come to realize that 'strange' behaviors of others are meaningful acts with clear goals. To guide students appropriately toward the goal, teachers should carefully plan activities using nursery rhymes.

#### **6. Planning activities**

It is important that teachers select materials appropriate for the respective developmental stage of the learners. Younger children enjoy the rhythm and the funniness of the verses, which provide older children opportunities to consider different ideas and ways of life. Teachers can use publications and audio materials as an introduction to cultural exploration. Nunan (1991) points out the importance of introducing authentic texts from the target language culture into the learning situation. Nursery rhyme-oriented activities make it possible for teachers to develop various topics using authentic materials such as picture books. Teachers can use various images to show the children that even a short and simple rhyme can be interpreted in many different ways. The illustrations also offer teachers an opportunity to talk about how people in different cultures look, dress, and act.

To determine the feasibility of activities using nursery rhymes, a workshop was held, in the summer of 2006, using nursery rhymes as teaching material. The results of the workshop are discussed in the next section.

## **7. Workshop**

### Purpose of the workshop

The workshop aimed to evaluate how young Japanese students reacted to an unfamiliar culture in the form of literature. The following points were focused on during the activities: (1) Recognition of another culture: how the participants recognize nursery rhymes, (2) Understanding of another culture: how the participants understand the meanings of the rhymes, and (3) Experience of another culture: how the participants experience the ideas and actions of the characters.

### Participants

Seven 10-year old Grade 4 students (4 girls and 3 boys) participated in the 5-session workshop. All of them attended every session. The boys had experience learning English at private language schools while none of the girls had such experience except for the English activities held at their elementary school. All of them had little prior knowledge about nursery rhymes and literature of nonsense.

### Activities

At each 45-minute session, participants were introduced to a new rhyme. I showed various illustrations of a rhyme from picture books and let the children imagine the meaning of the rhyme (recognition of another culture). Then I explained the meaning and asked the participants' impressions (understanding/not understanding of another culture). After the participants understood the meaning of the rhyme, I let them carry out an activity using the

rhyme (experience of another culture), such as list-making, roll-playing, pantomiming, etc. In the end, the participants recited the rhyme as well as those from previous sessions. The following is an illustration of how the participants faced an unfamiliar idea of nonsense.

### Sample rhyme

There was an old woman  
Lived under the hill,  
And if she isn't gone,  
She lives there still.

ばあさんがひとり  
おかのふもとにすんでいた  
もしもどこかへいっていないなら  
いまでもそこにすんでいる

(translation by Tanigawa, 1976)

According to Opie and Opie (1951), this type of fun, the 'self evident proposition, which is the very Essence of Truth,' has been included in nursery rhymes since the 17th and 18th centuries. This rhyme does not make you roll about laughing but rather requires an understanding of the word play which takes place. Participants were told that this particular rhyme had been popular since 18<sup>th</sup> century, so people must have found it amusing.

### Analysis of the participants' reactions

The participants reacted negatively to this rhyme. "I don't understand this rhyme," "What makes no sense isn't funny" were the impressions shared by them. One boy tried to make sense of the rhyme by adding a line. The following is the outcome with the added line in italics and a crossed-out word:

There was an old woman  
Lived under the hill;  
*Maybe she likes to live by herself. So*  
~~And~~ if she's not gone  
She lives there still.

The participants agreed that they understood the rhyme better with the added line. Asked if they found the new version of the rhyme amusing, however, they still answered no. I explained to them that the rhyme was not directly laughable, but had a twist and rather needed

a moment of reflection before you are amused by its word play. Although the “self-evident proposition, a non-nonsensical but quite silly statement of the obvious” (Christiansen 1997, p.13) was difficult for the participants to understand and accept, they recognized differences in ideas, and that in itself was a good cultural experience for them. The participants concluded that although they did not understand the funniness of the rhyme at the moment, they may in the future.

### Discussion

Participants who had little prior knowledge of English nursery rhymes and nonsense literature were exposed to unfamiliar language, ways of thinking, and behaviors through nursery rhymes, further helped by the descriptive illustrations. Of five unfamiliar rhymes, *There was an old woman* was the most difficult one for the participants to understand and accept. Their negative reactions to this rhyme seem to be caused by their lack of contact with different cultures. Only after receiving an explanation that nonsense is a genre of humor and there are people who appreciate this kind of rhyme did the workshop students try to understand it. Thus, positive attitudes towards different cultures can be encouraged by recognition and knowledge of different ideas.

### **8. Conclusion**

Although limited in sampling, the reactions of the workshop participants show that activities using nursery rhymes enhance students’ recognition of different perspectives. For effective intercultural interaction, knowledge and understanding of the culture is as important as knowledge of the language itself, because every language embodies the culture of the society where it is spoken. To achieve the goal to cultivate young Japanese students with English abilities, teachers should bear in mind ways to expose children to different ideas and behaviors so that they can recognize cultural differences and reflect upon them, which will ultimately help them gain cultural awareness. To this end, nursery rhymes can be used as effective teaching material.

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