

Snakes & Ladders

A publication of English Teachers in Japan (ETJ)

ISSN 1883 0080 Issue 1 Summer 2008

Story-time English in Elementary Schools

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English is soon to be a fact of life in Japanese elementary schools. The question now facing school administrators, education specialists and classroom teachers is how this reality will be handled. While the variables to be considered and the approaches available to address them are many, my proposal for elementary school English in Japan is a simple one: Story-Time English—either as the basis of the overall elementary English school curriculum or as a significant component of such a curriculum. Story-Time English provides a de facto curriculum based on the content and the language of each story, making curriculum, language and class activities planning less of a burden for untrained elementary school teachers. Story-Time English provides stable, accurate and authentic linguistic content suitable for repeated presentation to learners, yet which can be varied and expanded for extended and participatory activities. Finally, because it is based on stories, Story-Time English is an inherently motivating medium for learners and provides a range of input to stimulate the diversity of learner knowledge and skill levels found in schools today.

Why Story-Time English

The rationale for Story-Time English is based on the idea of providing learners with abundant comprehensible input. This is achieved by repeated exposure to appropriate language through the stories, but with variation in presentation reflecting some identified objective and variation of learner activity to fully engage learner attention. To achieve this, the key element of Story-Time English is the Story-Time Cycle. This cycle includes three broad steps—pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading—to be undertaken in a manner which both repeats for any one story and overlaps for several stories

over the course of several classes. The ‘pre-reading’ step introduces (or re-introduces) the story—the background, general theme or some key linguistic point—while also creating anticipation for the story. The ‘while-reading’ step provides multiple readings of the story over several classes, either using the CD that comes with many professionally-produced materials or in cooperation with an ALT. In general, the first readings should be done slowly, word by word and with clear enunciation. The subsequent readings can then be ‘read’ in a way that focuses on the dramatic element of the story or on key linguistic points—target vocabulary, action verbs, character emotions or key phrases, for example. While a fully suggestopedic approach would invite learners to listen passively to the story, ‘while-reading’ activities provide mental and kinesthetic stimulation. The ‘post-reading’ activity in some sense overlaps with the ‘while-reading’ activities, but should ideally be more production-oriented. While the fundamental and primary objective of Story-Time at the elementary school level is that the language is experienced, recognized and understood, curriculum objectives aiming toward communication will call for a transfer to productive activities.

How to: A Sample Sequence of Stories and Class Activities

Outlined below is an eight-class sequence undertaken at the Hirosaki University Faculty of Education Attached Elementary School (fifth-grade, 35 students). This sequence included six stories,

both from an ESL instructional story series and 'real' stories, authentic children's storybooks. The necessary materials are introduced, after which the Story Sequence is provided, showing the overlapping and repetitive aspect of using stories in a curriculum based solely or predominantly on stories (in some cases with back-to-back 'while-reading' activities for the same story). This is followed by an outline of some of the specific 'pre-reading,' 'while-reading' and 'post-reading' activities.

Story-Time Materials

Visual materials: enlarged, color photo-copies of the storybook so that all the students can 'see' the story, a very important part of the impact of the story for children. The CD or a human reader: as asserted above, repetition of the story is important both for comprehension of the story itself as well as for securing the linguistic input offered by the story. This can be accomplished with a CD, but a native speaker should be able to better produce the theatrical reading or a reading that focuses on key-points. This can be a key role for the ALT in a team-teaching situation.

The 'while-reading' and 'post-reading' activity materials.

A Sample Story-Time Sequence

Class 1: Story 1: Pre-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity; Post-Reading Activity.

Class 2: Story 1: Pre-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity; Post-Reading Activity. Story 2: Pre-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity.

Class 3: Story 1: While-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity. Story 2: Pre-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity.

Class 4: Story 3: Pre-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity.

Class 5: Story 3: While-Reading Activity. Story 4: Pre-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity.

Class 6: Story 4: While-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity. Story 5: While-Reading Activity.

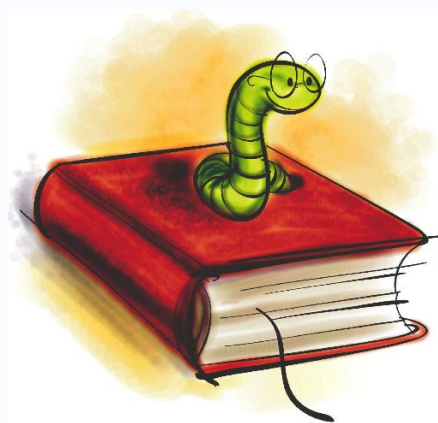
Class 7: Story 5: While-Reading Activity. Post-Reading Activity covering all stories. Story 6: Pre-Reading Activity.

Class 8: Story 5: While-Reading Activity. Story 6: While-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity; While-Reading Activity.

Some Story-Time Activities

Pre-Reading Activities:

In addition to introducing the story content, 'pre-reading' activities also create anticipation for the story. This can be achieved by showing some of the images from the story while asking leading questions or questions that tap into the experiences of the learners; this is best done in Japanese. Anticipation can be created by withholding important images from the story, particularly the last, concluding page.



While-Reading Activities:

While-reading' activities can be simple paper-and-pencil solo tasks or some form of cooperative activity, engaged in while the story is being read.

(1) Clear Reading: slowly and with clear enunciation; this is a very important reading, read at a pace that ensures that students can focus both on separate words and the relationships revealed in the structure of sentences.

(2) Comment Reading: include comments in Japanese about details in the story and an explicit focus on some language aspect while the story is being read (dialogue, nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc.).

(3) Scrambled Story Reading: students arrange scrambled pictures from the story while the story is being read, either with or without showing the storybook pictures (individual or group).

(4) Story Scene Reading: students hold up story scene at appropriate time while the story is being read (whole class activity, with several pages per student, multiple students with the same image is preferable).

(5) Interesting English Reading: students write down words they notice from the story (words can be

written in Japanese, katakana, or romaji).

(6) Cut and Color Reading: students cut, color, arrange, etc. mixed-up images from the story while the story is read. The key is not that they perform any specific task with the images, but rather that they are interacting with the images while the story is being read.

(7) Mixed-Up Images Reading: students connect mixed-up images from the story while the story is being read, by drawing a line, for example, on a handout with the images of the story (various copies with different patterns should be provided to encourage individual work).

(8) Random Page Reading: students identify images from the story on the basis of reading parts of the story at random (as above, if a solo activity, various activity sheets should be provided so that students have an individual outcome).

(9) Incomplete Story Reading: students identify missing scenes from the story and draw the scene.

(10) A Story-Tree Diagram: students are instructed in how to draw a tree diagram portraying events and relationships in a story. While correct comprehension is important, the objective of such an activity is less accuracy than motivating students to listen carefully and process and use the information they hear.



The activities outlined above represent just a few of the potential activities that can be developed and used to engage students in the stories and the language as the story is being read. The classroom teacher will be able to develop appropriate activities for their students based on the ideas presented above. The important point is not that any one activity is better than any other activity, but that different activities should accompany the different readings of the story.

Post-Reading Activities:

The 'post-reading' activities should either involve learner

participation in the story or be based on some transfer of the language to a new context.

(1) Comprehension Check: through oral questioning (in Japanese).

(2) Comprehension Check: specific aspects of the story are checked through questions and answers or through free writing. This should be allowed in Japanese, with use of English words/phrases encouraged.

(3) Student Reading: students participate in reading sections, ideally dialogue sections, either as class overall or as groups for different characters.

(4) Role-Play: students perform the original story without making any changes.

(5) Story Production: students change parts of the story, for example, the names and backgrounds of characters and the settings and action sequences of the story. Story Production also could entail students developing an entirely new story sequence that parallels the original story.

(6) Story Review: review all the stories done by, for example, using the enlarged picture story-books and asking learners to recall the stories (in Japanese) with reference by teacher to key words and phrases about the story and from the story (in English).

Conclusion

This article proposed Story-Time English as the basis of an elementary school English curriculum and outlined the important elements of such a curriculum based on an eight-class sequence. I believe in the potential of stories in English education and hope readers will join with me in bringing Story-Time English into the elementary school English classrooms of Japan.

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