

How to Use Stories in Elementary School English Education — A Teaching Material Based on “A Lost Button” by Arnold Lobel —

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Abstract. English will become a compulsory subject for fifth- and sixth-graders in Japanese elementary schools in 2020. This research aims to present ways in which a modified version of “A Lost Button” by Arnold Lobel can contribute to improving learners’ four skills. The work is also expected to foster an attitude toward communication due to the familiarity of Lobel’s works among Japanese elementary school pupils.

Key words : elementary school, English language education, literature, story, Lobel

1. Introduction: Background and aim

English will become a compulsory subject for fifth- and sixth-graders in Japanese elementary schools in 2020. The current “foreign language activity” classes will be conducted for third- and fourth-graders. There are many issues to be solved such as; teachers’ ability to use and teach English¹; time to consult with ALTs; the connection with English at junior high school. At least, however, we now have some indication of what and how we should teach because the new Course of Study was announced in March 2017. In the case of fifth- and sixth-graders the lessons will be held 70 times a year, that is to say, two classes a week—most probably with one class lasting 45 minutes and the other divided into three 15-minute units.

This research aims to present ways in which we could teach English as a subject in elementary schools, which means our target is

fifth- or sixth-graders. Teaching materials to be focused on are stories, simply because we have studied the relationship between literature and English as a second or foreign language².

2. Stories to be dealt with in elementary schools

English is currently taught as “foreign language activity” in the fifth and sixth grades, so there exist no government-authorized textbooks. Instead, teachers are free to use *Hi, Friends!* and *Hi, Friends! 2*, the supplementary teaching materials made by MEXT in the 2012-2013 school year. *Hi, Friends! 2*, intended for sixth graders, contains a story in Lesson 7 (among the total 8 lessons). The story is a modified version of “Momotaro,” a Japanese fable. The modification is rather radical—with the goblins and Momotaro, hand in hand, wishing their everlasting friendship. This story of “Momotaro” is part of “foreign language activity,” and naturally does not cover reading

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¹ According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) in 2016, among public elementary school teachers 5.128 percent were licensed to teach English, and 1.008 percent had English abilities equivalent to or above CEFR B2 (STEP pre-1, TOEIC 730, TOEFL-PBT 550, TOEFL-CBT 213, TOEFL-iBT 80.) For more details, please refer to:

http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/04/07/1384236_08.pdf

² Stories are included in the teaching materials listed on page 144 in the New Course of Study for elementary schools. For more details, please refer to:

http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2017/05/12/1384661_4_2.pdf

Table 1: List of Stories in Junior High School Textbooks (for 1st Years)

Textbook	Story	Author
<i>Sunshine</i>	“Grandma Baba and Her Friends on a Sleigh”	Wakiko Sato
<i>New Crown</i>	<i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i> and <i>Through the Looking-Glass</i>	Lewis Carroll
<i>One World</i>	“A Lost Button” in <i>Frog and Toad are Friends</i>	Arnold Lobel
<i>New Horizon</i>	“The Restaurant with Many Orders”	Kenji Miyazawa
<i>Columbus 21</i>	“The Lion and the Mouse”	originally written
<i>Total English</i>	“Who Is Joey’s Favorite Girl?”	originally written

and writing. These two skills must be dealt with, once English becomes a subject in 2020.

A hint for dealing with stories in elementary school English as a subject might lie in what junior high schools are currently doing rather than in “Momotaro” in *Hi, Friends! 2*. This is because the contents for instruction described in the new Course of Study for elementary schools correspond not insignificantly with those in the current Course of Study for junior high schools³. All the four skills are being dealt with in junior high schools, and so the stories currently taught in junior high schools, especially for first-year students, may help us think of ways in which we could teach stories in elementary schools in terms of reading and writing as well as speaking and listening.

Table 1 is a list of the stories included in the six textbooks currently used for first-year junior high school students. “Grandma Baba and Her Friends on a Sleigh” alone is included in a regular lesson (“program” in the case of *Sunshine*). All the other stories are categorized as “Reading,” “Reading Lesson,” or “Let’s Read” — differentiated from regular lessons. *New Crown* also contains “Little Mouse Wants an Apple” by Yoshio Nakae and two stories from Japan’s Funny Short Stories, but these, being put in the appendix to the textbook, are

excluded from the list. As is shown in the list, two of the six stories were originally written for the textbooks. The other four stories are based on original texts, but are radically simplified in terms of both English and content.

Among the six stories listed in Table 1, we’d like to pay particular attention to “A Lost Button” by Arnold Lobel. This is because a different story (“The Letter”) by the same author—included in the same book (*Frog and Toad are Friends*) as “A Lost Button”—is dealt with in all of the five Japanese (national language) textbooks used in elementary schools in 2015⁴. “The Letter,” dealt with in the Japanese textbooks for first- or second- graders, may help make “A Lost Button” familiar for fifth- and sixth-graders.

3. “A Lost Button” as a teaching material

“A Lost Button” in *One World English Course 1* is a modification of Lobel’s original text. We further modified “A Lost Button” from *One World English Course 1* so that it might become easier for elementary pupils to comprehend. The following is our version of “A Lost Button”:

³ Taking vocabulary as an example, the number of words to be dealt with in elementary schools will be 600~700, while the current number for junior high school students is 1200. This might mean the words for the present first-year junior high school students will mostly be covered in elementary school. For the comparison of the other teaching elements between junior high and elementary schools, please refer to the MEXT homepage (<http://www.mext.go.jp/>).

⁴ “The Restaurant with Many Orders” by Kenji Miyazawa is also dealt with, but only in two out of the five Japanese textbooks. Besides, the two textbooks with the story are both for fifth-graders, which might imply the story is too difficult for fifth-graders to study in English classes.

“A Lost Button” by Arnold Lobel

1 Toad and Frog went for a walk.
2 They came back to Toad’s house.
3 “I am tired. And I lost my jacket button!”
4 said Toad.
5 “Don’t worry. Let’s find your button,” said
6 Frog.

7 Toad and Frog walked back to the park.
8 “I found your button!” said Frog.
9 “No, it is black. My button was white,”
10 said Toad.
11 Toad put the black button in his pocket.

12 A bird came and said, “I found a button!”
13 “No, it is small. My button was big,” said
14 Toad.
15 Toad put the small button in his pocket.

16 A raccoon came and said, “I found a
17 button!”
18 “No, it is square. My button was round,”
19 said Toad.
20 Toad put the square button in his pocket.
21 Toad said in a loud voice, “We found many
22 buttons! But they are not my buttons!”

23 Toad went back home. And on the floor, he
24 saw his white, big, round button.
25 “Oh! It was here. I made a lot of trouble for
26 Frog.”
27 Toad took all the buttons out of his pocket.
28 He sewed the buttons all over his jacket.
29 He gave the jacket to Frog the next day.
30 Frog said in a loud voice, “It is beautiful!
31 So many buttons!”

We’d like to show here how this text of “A Lost Button” could be used in the classroom. We studied the new Course of Study and found that pupils’ four skills may be trained in the following four steps:

- Step 1: Pupils listen to their teacher’s reading of the text (listening)
- Step 2: Pupils match sounds with letters, and

then read the letters aloud (reading)

Step 3: Pupils transcribe the letters used in the text (writing)

Step 4: Pupils utter their ideas about the text (speaking)

Instruction should be conducted in this order so that pupils study “A Lost Button” smoothly. The following are detailed explanations of each step.

Step 1: Pupils listen to their teacher’s reading of the text (listening)

“A Lost Button” is a picture book with the illustrations by Lobel himself. Teachers can start their teaching with reading the text aloud while showing the illustrations to their pupils. This first reading should be done from cover to cover so that pupils may follow the storyline. Needless to say, teachers should read in a way that attracts their pupils. For example: teachers make a pause before ‘And’ in line 3; read ‘Don’t worry’ with emotion in line 5; act when reading line 11 (‘Toad put the black button in his pocket’); emphasize contrastive words like ‘small’ and ‘big’ in line 13; change voices between Toad and Frog; and make clear the distinction between descriptive passages and words spoken by characters.

The first reading through can be followed by reading of the text segmented into some parts in order that pupils may grasp the outline and the main points of “A Lost Button.” After referring to the points to be focused on, teachers read the story again, dividing it into parts. The following procedure could be taken:

- (a) Before reading, teachers ask their pupils a question like “When Toad and Frog come back from a walk, what does Toad notice?” (This question can be asked in Japanese.)
- (b) Teachers read the first six lines aloud.
- (c) Pupils answer the question asked in (a).

In (c), pupils may answer either in English or in Japanese, “Toad lost his jacket button.” To this answer teachers may add another question,

“What does Frog say to Toad?” Here teachers will read the first six lines again, requiring pupils to listen to the same part three times in total.

When pupils have grasped the outline and the main points of “A Lost Button” by listening to the text segmented into some parts, the whole story should be read through by teachers. This will make pupils listen to the story at least four times.

As has been shown so far, having pupils listen to the story as many times as possible is of prime importance in this step. Pupils should get used to the English of the story sound-wise before going on to the next steps which deal with letters as well as sounds.

Step2: Pupils match sounds with letters, and then read the letters aloud (reading)

Teachers’ read-aloud practice in Step 1 aims to have familiarized pupils with “A Lost Button” sound-wise. The goal of the next step is to enable pupils to match the sounds of targeted expressions with their letters and read them aloud. The targeted expressions could be: (a) new words and phrases; (b) expressions with the grammatical elements to be learnt in a lesson; or (c) expressions referred to in the fourth step below. Let’s take ‘toad’ and ‘frog’ as examples of (a). Teachers read aloud the first six lines again, while pupils, following the text with their eyes, spot ‘toad’ and ‘frog.’ Next, teachers have pupils read these words aloud while making them notice the characteristics of English sounds—like [ou] in ‘toad’ and [ɔ:] in ‘frog.’ Pronunciation instruction is likely to be more effective if teachers refer to the relationships between letters and sounds. ‘Toad’ could be presented with ‘boat’ and ‘road,’ for instance.

Step 3: Pupils transcribe the letters used in the text (writing)

One possibility is that pupils transcribe the letters focused on in Step 2. In the case of ‘toad’ and ‘frog’ taken as an example above, the first letter of each word is actually capital (‘Toad’

and ‘Frog’). To have pupils think about the reason may also have them notice that the first letter of a proper noun is conventionally capital.

Step4: Pupils utter their ideas about the text (speaking)

Pair or group work, in addition to being effective in all the three steps discussed above, is especially so in Step 4. Pupils think about their ideas about “A Lost Button,” and can utter them in pairs and groups, or in the whole class.

Ideas about a story could be roughly divided into (a) what is related to part of the story and (b) what is related to the whole story. (The distinction between (a) and (b) is not always clear, though.) In both cases teachers need to help pupils react to the text. The following is an example of instruction that stimulates pupils’ ideas on (a) (“T” stands for Teachers). Japanese can be used when appropriate:

(While teachers read line 21 aloud, pupils follow the line in the text.)

T: What does ‘in a loud voice’ mean? Think in pairs.

(After eliciting the literal meaning of ‘in a loud voice,’ teachers have students think about Toad’s emotion expressed in his loud voice.)

T: Why did Toad say this in a loud voice? Think in pairs.

As line 21 makes a good contrast with line 30, teachers can have pupils compare the two lines:

(While teachers read line 30 aloud, pupils follow the line in the text.)

T: Lines 21 and 30 are similar to each other. What do you notice? Think in pairs.

(Pupils are expected to answer that ‘in a loud voice’ is used in both lines.)

T: Yes, Frog said in a loud voice as Toad did in line 21. Does this mean Frog is feeling here the same way as Toad in line 21? Think in pairs.

Making pupils compare some parts this way will lead them to think about the text more as a whole, thus eliciting pupils' ideas on (b). The following instruction, trying to trace Toad's emotions throughout the story, is more inclined toward (b):

T: Toad speaks several times. In which lines does he speak? Talk in a group of four.

T: OK. Toad speaks in lines 3, 9, 13, 18, 21-22, and 25-26. How is Toad feeling in these lines? Talk in the same group.

(Pupils are expected to say: "Tired and surprised in line 3"; "In lines 9, 13, and 18, Toad is feeling sad"; "Angry in lines 21-22"; "Toad is surprised and sorry in lines 25-26.")

Teachers can ask some more questions on Toad's emotions in these lines as follows:

T: Is there any difference in the sadness felt by Toad in lines 9, 13, and 18?"

T: In lines 3 and 25-26, Toad is surprised. Why is Toad surprised? Is there any difference between line 3 and lines 25-26?

These questions by teachers will stimulate pupils to think and speak about the story.

The finishing touches could be provided to Step 4 in the form of a drama based on "A Lost Button." Teachers can read the descriptive passages aloud as a narrator, so that pupils can concentrate on the lines spoken by the four characters, Toad, Frog, a bird, and a raccoon. The four characters could be acted by four pupils. Pupils are expected to speak their parts with the emotions that they have read so far in the four characters' lines.

4. Conclusion:

Literature in English language education

This paper has discussed how stories could

be dealt with in elementary school English education, taking "A Lost Button" by Arnold Lobel as an example. In this conclusion we'd like to refer to the potential that literature has in English language education.

Literature has been rather unpopular in English language education in Japan, partially because practical communication abilities, wrongly taken as opposite to literary ones, have been emphasized. The unpopularity is reflected in the fact that English textbooks authorized by the government have few literary materials⁵. We insist, however, that the potential of literature has not been exhausted yet. (Strictly speaking, it has never been discovered.) There are at least two elements that could be emphasized when dealing with literature in the classroom: interpretation and expression. We here discuss them separately, but in actuality they are closely related to each other.

We read literature for many reasons. One of them is that we are simply moved, consoled, or entertained by reading it. Interestingly (though not surprisingly), different literary works affect different people; even when some people are moved by the same work, they might find different parts of the work most moving; even when they are moved by the same part of the same work, the reasons might differ from person to person. This is closely related to the fact that "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation" (Barthes, 1968: 148). Barthes goes on to claim that "there is one place where this multiplicity is focused" and that "that place is the reader." The reader of a teaching material in the classroom is of course a learner. Classes should be conducted in ways in which one learner's reading (interpretation) of a text can be different from another learner's. This is all the more important because the questions contained in the textbooks currently used in

⁵ For example, as was shown in Table 1, only one textbook—among the six textbooks for first-year junior high school students—includes a story in a regular lesson. There are only two cases in which other literary genres than stories are in the textbooks: two "Mother Goose" nursery rhymes are printed on the last two pages (after the appendix) of *New Crown*; two sets of pop music lyrics are in the appendix to *One World*.

junior and senior high schools are mostly focused on literal understanding of the text and have no room for interpretation.

When using a literary work in the classroom we should also bear in mind the fact that how it is written (expression itself) is as important as what is written in it (content matter). Taking Robert Burns's line "O MY Luve's like a red, red rose" (Oh, my love is like a red, red rose) as an example of such literary expression, the repetition of [l] and [r] at the beginning of words (alliteration) creates a rhythm in the line; the image of a red rose captures us, making us imagine various things. Why red? Why rose? It could have been "a dancing daffodil." The expression chosen by Burns stimulates our imagination and makes us interpret it. (Thus, expression is closely related to interpretation.) Focus on expression itself can be rephrased as "focus on the message for its own sake" or focus on "the poetic function of language" (Jacobson, 1960: 37). Jacobson rightly insists that "the scrutiny of language requires a thorough consideration of its poetic function" (Jacobson, 1960: 37). Although the word "poetic" is used by Jacobson, we can expand his argument and regard the poetic function as relevant to expressions generally used in literature. (Not only poets but also literary writers in general carefully combine words to create their texts.) Despite Jacobson's insistence above, due attention has not been

paid to expression itself in English language education in Japan. Literature can provide learners with good materials for learning the importance of expression. This is because the poetic function, being "[verbal art's] dominant, determining function," can perhaps most effectively be learnt though literature (Jacobson, 1960: 37).

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