

The Benefits of the Use of Children's Literature in English Language and Global Citizenship Education in Japan

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Abstract

This study discusses how children's literature can play an important role in achieving two goals: developing Japanese students' English proficiency levels and cultivating them to be global citizens. English as a foreign language (EFL) learners in Japan should be provided with more opportunities to engage with the English language outside the classroom. Free voluntary reading, proposed by Krashen (2011) and based on his comprehension hypothesis, makes this possible. The reading material provided by children's literature is appropriate for EFL learners, because works of diverse language levels and genres are readily available. Additionally, EFL learners can read for their own pleasure while unconsciously improving their English language abilities.

Children's literature can also benefit global education in many ways. Metaphorically, children's literature serves as a window as well as a mirror. It serves as the latter because it reflects our reality and as the former because it provides an opening to different worlds. For example, a reading of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* can serve to enhance our understanding of Christian values. Hence, children's literature provides excellent teaching materials for both English language instruction and global citizenship education.

Introduction

Beginning in 2011, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in Japan implemented New Courses of Study. Regarding the field of foreign language education, MEXT stresses the importance of increasing students' English proficiency so that, in today's global society, they can easily communicate in English and live in harmony with people from diverse cultures. MEXT hopes to achieve two goals: developing students' English proficiency levels and cultivating them to be global citizens. This paper discusses how children's literature can play an important role in achieving these goals. My discussion is partially based on my own practice.

First, children's literature is a potentially useful material for English language education,

because it can enhance learners' motivation. While they enjoy good stories, English learners can also increase their English proficiency.

Second, children's literature is useful for cultivating global citizenship in young readers. While they enjoy good stories, young readers can learn the importance of cooperation among people from different cultures.

This study focuses on these two aspects. I will show how children's literature can be used as excellent teaching materials for both English language instruction and global citizenship education.

I. Using Children's Literature in English Language Education

1. Developing a New Policy for English Language Education

MEXT formed a commission to discuss ways to reform English language education in Japan. In 2011, this Commission issued a report entitled "Five Proposals for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication" and published it on MEXT's English website (see, http://www.mext.go.jp/component/english/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2012/07/09/1319707_1.pdf).

The Five proposals are as follows:

1. Assessment and verification of required English language ability levels of each student.
2. Promotion of students' awareness of the importance of English language proficiency in a global society and stimulation of motivation for English language learning.
3. Provision of more opportunities for students to use English through effective utilization of ALTs, ICT, etc.
4. Reinforcement of English language skills and instructional abilities of English teachers/strategic improvement of English language education at school and community levels.
5. Modification of university entrance exams to reflect the global society.

To achieve Proposal 1, out of three measures, the Commission proposed that "the

Government, as well as education boards and schools, should actively use STEP, GTEC for STUDENTS, and other external certification tests to assess and verify that students have attained required levels of English proficiency” (Proposals, 3).

To achieve Proposal 2, out of five measures, the Commission proposed that “the Government should present messages from people who use English in their activities and provide other information to stimulate students’ motivation for learning English” (Proposals, 4).

To achieve Proposal 3, out of five measures, the Commission proposed that “the Government should assess the current situation with ALTs, and provide schools and education boards with information about efficient methods of team teaching and the use of ALTs for out-of-school activities” (Proposals, 6).

To achieve Proposal 4, out of five measures, the Commission proposed that “the Government should provide education boards and schools with useful information for the implementation of training, such as exemplary training programs and teaching materials related to presentations, debates, discussions, and other educational methods” (Proposals, 8).

To achieve Proposal 5, out of four measures, the Commission proposed that “the Government should encourage the use of TOEFL, TOEIC, and other external certification tests for Admission Office exams, general entrance exams, and other types of entrance exams to facilitate proper evaluation of foreign language communication skills of prospective students” (Proposals, 11).

Shortly after the Commission provided this summary of the “Five Proposals,” MEXT conducted a survey during the period between August and October 2011 to determine the factors necessary for successful promotion of these proposals. The results of the survey are shown on the aforementioned MEXT English Website. The following is a sample of a student’s English ability and learning attainment target (with respect to Proposal, 1):

9.5% of third-year junior high school students that attend public schools demonstrated English language abilities at the level of Grade 3 or higher on the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) examination.

16.0% of the students demonstrated English language abilities equivalent to the level of STEP Grade 3 or higher without having taken an external certification test. This brings the total number of students who are proficient at this level to approximately 25.5 %. (Results are combined results of surveys in public junior high and high schools.)

As can be seen from these proposals and measures and the subsequent survey results, it would be no exaggeration to say that our future depends on our mastery of languages and, in particular, on our mastery of the English language. In addition to these proposals and specific measures, in this paper, I propose that using children's literature can help to effectively address this enormous challenge. It is essential that EFL learners practice reading English outside the classroom. We must provide these learners with a wide variety of materials matching their ability levels. As Mikulecky (2007, 3) maintained, in recent years, the availability of children's literature has exploded and the expansion of these resources will continue. We now live in an environment favorable for EFL learners. The time has come for teachers and students to reconsider the benefits of children's literature.

2. Prior Status of the Use of Children's Literature in English Language Education

Before I discuss some benefits of children's literature, I will briefly review the perceptions of children's literature over the past years in relation to English language education.

Although children's literature can provide a rich source of educational materials for many students who learn English as a foreign language, it has not been given proper attention and respect by college researchers or middle and high school teachers. Most academic researchers have rejected children's literature and favored classical works. In general, these scholars have tended to select classical English language works by Shakespeare, Dickens, etc. as textbooks for English literature and general English proficiency courses. Consequently, many students have struggled painfully during English lessons and have rapidly lost interest in English language learning.

Middle and high school teachers have been required to use a limited number of officially authorized textbooks.

Regarding traditional teaching methods, most teachers adopted the grammar-translation method, which stressed the importance of grammatical rules and emphasized students' ability to translate English into Japanese. Teachers urged students to memorize English so that they could pass entrance examinations for universities. However, at the present time, because of the pressure of growing globalization, English education has been changing rapidly. The emphasis has shifted from grammatical knowledge of English and shifted towards the development of communication skills. MEXT introduced foreign language activities into the curricula of the fifth and sixth grades in elementary schools, increased the number of English lessons per week from three to four in middle schools, and stipulated that high school English lessons must be conducted primarily in English. These educational reforms are currently underway.

3. Benefits of Extensive Reading

In this section, I discuss the contributions that children's literature can make to English language education.

First, children's literature can be useful for extensive reading or free voluntary reading. It provides readers with many amusing materials. In addition to original works, a variety of compilations categorized in accordance with learners' English levels is available. If learners were to derive great pleasure from their reading, they would possibly be motivated to read further. More importantly, this steady habit of reading would help learners develop the urge to learn independently.

Theoretically, Krashen's (2011, 82–3) four hypotheses relating to free voluntary reading support this approach. Krashen proposed the forgetting hypothesis, the effortless reading hypothesis, the unawareness of acquisition hypothesis, and the comprehension checking hypothesis. He explained the forgetting hypothesis in this way: “language acquisition occurs most effectively when we are so interested in the message that we ‘forget’ that it contains new grammar and vocabulary, or, in the case of second language readers, that it is in another language”

(82). He explained the effortless reading hypothesis as follows: “the best reading for language development is easy reading, reading that seems to be completely comprehensible without struggle” (82). He explained the unawareness of acquisition hypothesis in this way: “readers will not be aware that they are improving while they are reading, but will only be aware of reading interesting books” (83). These three hypotheses support the concept that free voluntary reading exerts a positive impact on the development of reading proficiency. However, the comprehension checking hypothesis appears to exert a negative effect. Krashen (2011) explained this hypothesis as follows: “the more we check comprehension, the less readers understand and the less they acquire” (83).

With respect to the application of these hypotheses to EFL acquisition, other researchers (Ono, Day, and Harsch, 2004) have stated that EFL learners can spontaneously expand their “comfort zone” by reading books they choose themselves. This comfort zone can change based on the tastes and language levels of EFL learners. In my own experience, I found my “comfort zone” while reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when I came upon the following passage:

Just as the frying-pan was nicely hissing, Peter and Mr. Beaver came in with fish which Mr. Beaver had already opened with his knife and cleaned out in the open air. You can think how good the new-caught fish smelled while they were frying and how the hungry children longed for them to be done and how very much hungrier still they had become before Mr. Beaver said, “Now we’re nearly ready” (82–3).

I remember that the imagined sound and smell of frying fish also stimulated my own healthy appetite. The provision of enjoyable stories is a very important way to enhance learners’ motivations and to improve their English skills.

In the next section, I will provide some examples of my use of children’s literature as appropriate materials for English language education.

3. Teacher-Training Seminar

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology instituted a teaching certificate renewal system in 2009. Under the revised regulations, teaching certificates are valid for 10 years. Teachers who received a certificate prior to the introduction of this new system are also required to complete renewal courses every 10 years. All national colleges must offer compulsory and optional renewal courses. In preparing a teacher-training seminar, I adopted a literary approach to developing professional English skills based on the concept that the use of children's literature could combine literary and literacy education.

To begin, I selected a few picture books from the *Oxford Reading Tree* series. I demonstrated their use in a DVD that showed a model method of instruction for elementary school teachers. I assumed that beautiful, amusing picture books would surely attract children. In the seminar, I intentionally exhibited several pages that showed pictures with no words. I asked the seminar attendees to create their own stories based on those pictures. I then asked that they read their stories aloud to one another and then comment on each other's stories. The attendees used their imaginations to create a variety of stories, leading to rich language activities.

Next, I suggested that traditional nursery rhymes (i.e., stories generally referred to as "Mother Goose Rhymes") could be used as teaching materials for EFL learners. For example, one of the nursery rhymes can be described as an "accumulative poem." This rhyme has eleven lines. Each line is connected by the repetition of the relative pronoun "that":

This is the farmer sowing his corn,
That kept the cock that crowed in the morn,
That waked the priest all shaven and shorn,
That married the man all tattered and torn,
That kissed the maiden all forlorn,
That milked the cow with the crumpled horn,
That tossed the dog,
That worried the cat,
That killed the rat,

That ate the malt
That lay in the house that Jack built (*The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, 269–73).

This rhyme is an interesting example of how children’s literature can close the gap between literary and literacy education.

Suspense is one of the narrative devices writers intentionally use in fantasy or adventure stories. It can provide EFL learners with many opportunities to predict what will happen next. I recommend that, at the time that EFL learners arrive at the parts of stories that create suspense, teachers should instruct their students to stop reading and predict the next development in the story. One example can be taken from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950). I used this book as sample reading material for junior high and high school teachers during the seminar. In one scene, Lucy passes through a wardrobe into a winter forest. She meets Tumnus, a half-human/half-animal faun. Students must predict the development of the story based on their prior knowledge. This reading activity naturally leads to other activities such as writing, speaking, and discussion.

Finally, in many stories, a major theme is often repeated. This repetition can facilitate students’ deeper understanding of the stories and of their language characteristics. To demonstrate this, I provide an additional example taken from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. This work may have been intended to teach children Christian values. Therefore, a major theme, the revival of various things, appears frequently. For example, in the following scene, the sound of running water is used to announce that spring has come at last. The sound increases from the sound of melting snow to the violent rushing of a swift river:

And in that silence Edmund could at last listen to the other noise properly. A strange, sweet, *rustling, chattering* noise—and yet not so strange for he’d heard it before—if only he could remember where! Then all at once he did remember. It was the noise of *running* water. All round though out of sight, there were streams, *chattering, murmuring, bubbling, splashing* and even (in the distance) *roaring* (underlined by the author, 129).

The repetition of *ing*-forms is an effective way to express the occurrence of a miracle. Lewis's artistic language helps students naturally respond to the description. This helps them build their vocabularies and consolidate their understanding of grammar.

II. Using Children's Literature in Global Citizenship Education

1. Mirrors and Windows

Society is becoming increasingly multicultural and global. What role can children's literature play in this social context? Leman (2007, 65) focused on Bishop's (1994) metaphoric conceptualization of children's literature as mirrors and windows. She notes that his metaphoric use of children's literature as mirrors and windows is "illuminating" (Leman 2007, 65). When it functions as a mirror, children's literature can enhance our understanding of our cultures and ourselves. When it functions as a window, it can deepen our understanding of different people and their cultures. These two concepts are very important in global citizenship education.

2. Different perspectives

As stated above, children's literature can function as a window or door providing entry to many different worlds. For example, in *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice falls down a rabbit hole and enters Wonderland. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the Pevensie siblings pass through a wardrobe to enter Narnia. In the *Harry Potter* series, on his first trip to Hogwarts, Harry Potter must pass through the walls of Platforms 9 and 10 to reach Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. From there, he catches a train bound for Hogwarts.

In these stories, the protagonists have many strange experiences that differ greatly from their familiar existences. To cite a typical example, in *Alice in Wonderland*, the Mock Turtle tells Alice the names of the subjects he studies in his school. He states that he studies "Reeling," "Writhing," "Ambition," "Distraction," "Uglification," and "Derision." These subjects correspond respectively to the subjects Alice studies in her school: "Reading," "Writing," "Addition," "Subtraction," "Multiplication," and "Division." The names of the subjects the

Mock Turtle studies sound humorous as well as ridiculous. However, they also include some implicit criticism from a child's perspective of the standard educational system during that time in England.

3. Diversity

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the friendship between Lucy and a faun becomes particularly interesting when it is viewed from a multicultural perspective. When Lucy first enters Narnia, she meets Tumnus, a faun who is half-goat and half-man. He initially attempts to kidnap her and take her to the White Witch. However, he truly repents for this attempt. He then helps her return to the real world. Thus, Lucy and Tumnus become close friends. According to Downing (2005, 31), the author, C. S. Lewis, commented that this book originated with his memory of a picture that depicted a faun who carried an umbrella. A faun is a creature found in Roman mythology. It is interesting to observe Christian and Classical cultures as they meet beneath one umbrella.

4. Understanding of other cultures

For Japanese EFL learners, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* serves as a window that provides entry into the world of Christianity. They can experience basic Christian worldviews as they read this children's classic.

When Edmund first enters Narnia, he eats "Turkish Delight," a cake enchanted by the White Witch. He instantly becomes addicted to it. This episode clearly alludes to the sin of Adam and Eve, who ate from the Forbidden Tree. In all likelihood, as punishment for his sin, Edmund will be killed by the Witch, who serves as a symbolic servant of Satan. However, the lion, Aslan, dies to save Edmund's life. Edmund deeply repents his sin and redeems himself. He then bravely battles his enemies. Through Edmund's story, EFL learners can learn about one of the major Christian teachings: sin and redemption.

The lion, Aslan, represents Jesus Christ. Aslan's death on the Stone Table and his later revival parallel Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. However, this central part of the story,

which alludes to the miracle of Christian legend, can sometimes appear rather incomprehensible to many Japanese students. (For example, one of my students said that she could not understand why Aslan would sacrifice his life for Edmund.) In contrast, the change of seasons depicted in the book directly appeals to Japanese students. When Aslan comes to Narnia, spring also comes. Flowers bloom, birds sing, and brooks chuckle in the woods. This vivid description of spring also awakens great joy in readers' hearts:

Close beside the path they were following, a bird suddenly chirped from the branch of a tree. It was answered by the chuckle of another bird a little further off. And then, as if that had been a signal, there was chattering and chirruping in every direction, and then a moment of full song, and within five minutes the whole wood was ringing with birds' music ... (132).

5. Love and respect for small living things

In this section, I will discuss haiku, a traditional literary genre in Japan. The haiku is the shortest form of Japanese poetry. It dates back to the seventeenth century. In Matsuyama, where I currently reside, haiku writing is very popular, because Matsuyama is the birthplace of Shiki Masaoka (1867–1902), the leading reformer of modern haiku. According to Shiki and his followers' definition, the act of writing haiku is similar to that of taking photographs of impressive scenes from everyday life. A haiku contains seventeen syllables. Haiku often include seasonal references. Naturally, reading and writing haiku can be useful for enhancing children's love of life and of the natural world around them.

In this section, I will present some haiku from the poetry collection *Cool Melons—Turn to Frogs!* (Gollub 1998); the haiku are by Kobayashi Issa (1763–1827), a classical haiku poet. Currently, many Japanese people struggle to understand and enjoy Issa's haiku in the original Japanese, because of their archaic nature. However, I have discovered some important messages in Issa's haiku by reading *Cool Melons*, which is an English translation for American children. I observed that his haiku are filled with empathy and respect for small living things around him, such as plants, flowers, insects, birds, and animals. Therefore, his haiku provide excellent material for enhancing people's love of the natural world, which is one of the objectives of global

citizenship education. I now present some of Issa's haiku as they appear in English translation in *Cool Melons*:

Sparrow chicks—
Look out! Look out!
Make ways for Mr. Horse.

In this haiku, Issa worries about the fate of some sparrow chicks that walk on the high street. He warns them that they should flee before they are trampled to death by an approaching horse. Sparrow chicks can symbolize weak, socially insignificant things. A horse can symbolize social power. Issa always speaks in favor of the former. Gollub (1988) comments that

In Edo, which is now called Tokyo, he found a bustling city brimming with fancy homes and shops. People spoke quickly, and their hurried manner confused him. At times, Issa found work as a stable boy or servant. But other times, he went hungry and had no place to sleep. Still, he noticed little things that most people were too busy to see (15).

It is possible that no one feels any affection for flies. In the next haiku, Issa begs the reader to take pity on a fly and save its life.

Please, don't swat!
the housefly begs,
rubbing its hand and feet.

Gollub (1998) comments: "Issa never lost his affection for small creatures—or for almost anything he found along his path" (33).

The next haiku also conveys Issa's affection for small things:

Cool melons—
turn to frogs!
If people should come near.

Gollub (1998) comments: “Once when he saw watermelons left outside to chill, he felt sorry that someone would soon eat them up. If only, he wished, they could hop away, then people would leave them alone!” (33).

The process needed to understand haiku may appear rather complicated. However, most EFL students appear to better understand and enjoy Issa’s haiku in English than in archaic Japanese. In the English version, they can more easily learn the importance of the messages contained in Issa’s haiku. In addition, their empathy for the small things that surround us increases. They may also realize that they should try to live in harmony with nature and with people from different cultures.

6. Messages of Hope

In general, I believe that children’s literature can teach children a variety of messages pertaining to hope for the future. For example, Tomihiro Hoshino’s books contain paintings, poems, and essays containing messages of hope that seem to spring from his close day-to-day observations of nature. According to Bantock (1988, 76), who translated one of Hoshino’s illustrated books into English, in 1970, Hoshino suffered a serious accident shortly after he began to work as a physical education teacher. He fell to the floor during a demonstration of a somersault in the gymnasium. Because of this accident, he was paralyzed from the neck down. During the long period of recovery and hardship that followed, he learned to write. Then, he learned to paint pictures by holding a brush in his mouth. He slowly developed this technique and continued his artistic endeavors until he successfully published his first illustrated book of poems and essays.

The majority of his poems contain messages of hope. Consider “Mourning Glory” (1980) for example:

One tendril climbs up a single stick
At the top of the stick is the summer sky
I wish I could climb up like that (40)

In this illustrated short poem, the poet focuses on a thin tendril rather than the gorgeous

petals of a morning glory. The tendril displays a strong desire for growth, while the petals long for few hours in the morning. It climbs up a single stick toward the vast blue sky, which symbolizes boundless hope. The poet appears to be attempting to increase his strength by viewing this hopeful scene.

Another example of a hopeful message appears in “Tawny Day Lily” (1980):

Once
looking at some flowering weeds
trembling in the breeze
I sensed their weakness

Today
seeing the same weeds
trembling in the breeze
I realized their strength (42)

A day lily can be associated with a short life because some say that this flower lives only one day. In the first stanza, we see that the poet once believed they were weak flowers. However, in the second stanza, he becomes aware of their strength. What brought about this change in perspective? The poet possibly awoke to the inestimable value of every living thing because of his faith in Christianity. However, aside from the issue of religion, the positive perspective of this poet, who attempts to see the inestimable value of everything and every person in the world, is a crucial perspective that every world citizen must adopt so that he or she can all transcend cultural differences.

Conclusion

In this paper, I discussed the benefits of using children’s literature in English language and global citizenship education. In conclusion, I will summarize the discussion and add some supplementary explanations.

English language education in Japan now faces an enormous challenge. Japanese students must increase English language proficiency to levels that match international standards. Young EFL learners should be provided with more opportunities to immerse themselves to engage with the English language both inside and outside the classroom. In this regard, Krashen (2004), who proposed free voluntary reading based on his Comprehension Hypothesis, may be useful. Krashen described free voluntary reading as “reading that is easily comprehensible and compelling, reading that the reader selects...reading that is done with no testing...no book reports, but its own sake, for pleasure” (Krashen 71). Children’s literature provides appropriate material for this type of free voluntary reading. It has a long tradition, and works of diverse language levels and genres are readily available.

The recent, remarkable development of ICT technologies provides favorable conditions for encouraging free voluntary reading of children’s literature. EFL learners can freely access many types of children’s literature on the Internet. Further, the production of e-books has rapidly increased and bestselling books are available for purchase at reasonable prices.

Using children’s literature can also be helpful in teacher training programs. One might say that good EFL teachers are good EFL learners. When they engage in free voluntary reading of children’s literature, they can read for their own pleasure while unconsciously improving their English language abilities. Their renewed joy and confidence will positively affect their teaching.

In the next section, I will summarize the second part of my discussion: the benefits of the use of children’s literature in global citizenship education.

We now live in a global society. Therefore, the importance of global education is rapidly increasing. In this social context, using children’s literature provides many benefits for global education. Metaphorically, children’s books serve as windows as well as mirrors. They serve as mirrors because they reflect our reality. They serve as windows because they offer avenues to different worlds. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* serves as an example of a window. We can explore Narnia along with the Pevensie siblings. We can also experience Christian worldviews, including the notions of sin, crucifixion, and resurrection. Alternatively, *Cool Melons—Turn to Frogs!* serves as an example of a mirror. When we read this book, we gain new

insights into the familiar. We also enhance our empathy for small things such as sparrows. In this English translation of some of the haiku of Kobayashi Issa, Japanese readers can rediscover aspects of these poems that they had not noticed in the Japanese originals. They can also deepen their understanding of their own culture.

As shown in these two books, children's literature can play an important role in global citizenship education. It can help deepen an individual's understanding of his or her own and other cultures.

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