

What can we teach with books by Leo Lionni?

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Leo Lionni is a popular children's book creator and author of such beloved picture books as *Swimmy*, *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, *A color of his own*, and many more including four Caldecott Honor Books. Lionni's children's books display beautiful, boldly-colored collages and touching stories based on universal themes such as friendship, sharing, and cooperation. This paper explores various EFL activities for preschoolers and elementary school children based on Leo Lionni's picture books. Each activity is discussed with reference to the categorization of books according to different themes. Some of Lionni's stories, which have already been incorporated into Japanese L1 textbooks, are also introduced in this paper.

レオ・レオニは、「スイミー」「あおくんときいろちゃん」「じぶんだけのいるーいろいるさがしたカメレオンのはなし」他4冊のコレデカット賞受賞作品を含む多くの絵本を書いた人気作家である。レオニの作品は、美しく鮮やかなコラージュの挿絵と友情、分かち合い、協力など世界共通のテーマを織り込んだストーリーで構成されている。この論文はレオ・レオニの絵本を基にした幼児や小学生向けのEFLアクティビティーについての探究である。アクティビティーはそれぞれプレゼンターが分類したテーマに沿って提案されている。また、本稿では既に文部科学省の国語教科書に採用されているレオニの作品についても紹介する。

When I examined the list of the stories that have been chosen for Japanese language textbooks used in Japanese public elementary schools, I discovered that in addition to the Japanese stories there are many foreign titles including Leo Lionni, Arnold Lobel, and others. Taking advantage of this trend, I made a proposal that teachers use some picture books by Lionni as English textbooks for young learners.

In the following section, I introduce the work of Leo Lionni, the categorization of his books, and some activities designed for young learners of English. Two activities based on Lionni books - *It's mine!* and *The*

biggest house in the world - are also explained and discussed more in detail.

Activities such as coloring, drawing, and working on activity sheets seem to fit for preschool English when using Lionni picture books. Since Lionni's books are more story-based and do not include as many functions for children to play with compared to other popular picture books such as Eric Carle's books, retelling and story-recreation seemed to work effectively for elementary school students.

Picture books by Leo Lionni

Kiefer (1995) states that a picture book is a "unique form of art" (p. 7). The definition of Kiefer would apply to some of the Leo Lionni books. For instance, in the book *An extraordinary egg*, "Lionni uses collage with oil pastels, a mixture that adds texture to the pictures but allows the white of the paper to show through, giving a much lighter tone to this funny story" (Huck, Hepler, Hickman, & Kiefer, 1997, p. 205). In *Fish is fish*, "Leo Lionni creates underwater world with crayons, but he portrays the fish's conception of the frog's world with the brilliant colors of acrylics" (p. 209).

How Lionni's books have been incorporated into Japanese language textbooks

In 1992 and 1996 five titles of Lionni's books were selected for the grade 2, 3, and 4 Japanese language textbooks. Since the year 2000, a few titles have still been chosen mainly for grade 2 textbooks. The popular titles of Lionni's books for Japanese language textbooks are: *It's mine*, *Alexander and the wind-up mouse*, and *Swimmy* (see Appendix 1).

Teacher resources of Lionni's books

There are a few L1 instruction-guides specifically for the popular titles of *Alexander and the wind-up mouse* and *Swimmy*. Matsudo Bungei Kyouiku Kenkyukai (1987) offers various teaching ideas for teachers of Japanese based on the book *Alexander and the wind-up mouse*. For example, students imagine the dialog of the main characters of a particular scene and fill in the speech balloons to complete the cartoon-type worksheet. Teachers of English would be able to use this worksheet with students creating the dialogue in English.

Regarding the Japanese translated version of *Swimmy*, Yakushijin (2002) created a musical for young children based on the story of *Swimmy*. His aim was to design a musical for 2nd, 3rd and 4th graders where learners would enjoy singing the songs of *Swimmy* and teachers could organize a concert.

Setsuko Toyama (the author of English textbook *English Time*) also wrote *Swimmy* chants for elementary school students and presented at JALT 2003. The curriculum based on these *Swimmy* chants appears in the website introduced by an elementary school teacher. (Sakai, 2003)

In my son's Japanese language class, the students made a large collage of *Swimmy* and *Swimmy's* friends, exhibited on the wall of the classroom. Creating such a large piece of work needs teamwork, therefore, students would naturally build up their sense of respect and cooperation. In addition, one elementary school teacher created learning-cards to find adjectives to describe comparisons in the story. He also organized discussion sessions about the thoughts of the main character in particular scenes of this book by assigning each

student to make question-cards and present them in class. Through this activity, the teacher discovered that one student who was very quiet and reserved in showing her ideas in front of the class held a variety of unique ideas in her mind.

Categorization of the books by Leo Lionni

In examining Lionni's books, I identified nine groups based on themes such as: interesting contrast, simple and easy, unique art works, friendship, family, self-awareness, my responsibility, solidarity, and peace.

Compared to the books by Eric Carle, another popular picture book author, Lionni's books do not have many toy functions but rather offer more reading texts, which make his books rich in content. For example, the book *Little Blue and Little Yellow* could be placed into five categories or perhaps more (see Appendix 4). This book uses simple art and sentences, however, it includes the themes of colors, friends, family, and peace. The book even teaches to accept racial differences. In the beginning of the story, the two main characters Little Blue and Little Yellow change their original colors to green by hugging each other. When they come home, neither families recognize or accept *green* Little Blue and *green* Little Yellow as their own children because their colors are not blue and yellow any more.

The book *Swimmy* can be placed in three categories: friendship, self-awareness, and responsibility. (see Appendix 4). Swimmy, the little black fish, gathered other small red fish to form the shape of a large fish. Swimmy became the eye of this large fish. Previously considering his black color as a disadvantage, Swimmy never thought of being so

helpful to his friends before this scene. Finally, Swimmy and his friends succeeded in chasing the big tunas away.

Interesting contrast

This category seems to be one of the features of books by Leo Lionni. The books *Alexander and the wind-up mouse* and *Let's make rabbits* both include interesting contrasts. For example; the main characters of *Alexander and the wind-up mouse* are a real mouse and a mechanical toy mouse. The book *Let's make rabbits* is about a plain paper rabbit and a decorated paper rabbit who finally turn into one real rabbit after eating a special carrot.

Since both books present two contrasting characters—a real creature and artificial ones, the teacher could ask students to make a comparison chart and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each character.

Simple and easy

Let's play, *A color of his own*, *Inch by inch*, *The alphabet tree*, *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, and *On my beach there are many pebbles* are all very simple and easy-to-read books. Even so, each book has its own educational focus. For instance, *Inch by inch* is a book about an “inch worm” which can measure things with its body. In the classroom, students would find their own measuring instruments such as a short pencil, a twig, or a leaf and measure things with these instruments. Furthermore, it would be good to summarize the results into a chart (Hollenbeck, 1999, p.61). *The alphabet tree* begins with the scattered letters in a tree. A little later those letters form words, develop into sentences with the

help of a caterpillar, and finally create a peace message to the president. For young learners, it would be difficult to develop words into a message. However, they would be able to demonstrate how words are created by pieces of letters. After providing letter cards or cutout alphabets, teachers could support children and demonstrate gathering pieces of letters and together form some words.

A color of his own, Little Blue and Little Yellow, and On my beach there are many pebbles all have different art images, which are quite appealing to the eyes of readers. The first two books have brightly-colored visual images, and the third book is monochrome but presents various unique stone shapes and paintings. Since children could learn mixed-colors with the book *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, a teacher would perhaps like to combine this book with Eric Carle's *Hello, Red Fox* which is about complementary colors. After introducing these books, students could enjoy a stone-painting activity by exploring creating different colors by themselves.

Uniqueness

Pezzettino is a wonderful story about a little piece who starts looking for the thing it belongs to. Finally, the little piece discovers he is also composed of pieces. Another unique book, *Flea story*, is about the journey of two fleas whose personalities are completely opposite. The adventurous flea moved from place to place whereas the less adventurous flea happily came back to where it was (on the dog) in the end. *The biggest house in the world* is a similar story to *Flea story* where the little snail that always wanted the biggest house finally realized his original size was perfect. The book

also has eye-catching, colorful illustrations and includes the theme of self-awareness. *A busy year* is a story of mice, and teachers could teach months and seasons to the students with this book. The uniqueness of *A busy year* is its long vertical shape unlike other books of Lionni's.

Compared to other categories, the illustrations in the books of this category are depicted by different drawing techniques with colored pencil, crayon, pastels, or oil and water paint. It would be interesting to let students compare the difference between these art works and other of Lionni's popular collage works.

Friendship

Little Blue and Little Yellow, An extraordinary egg, Tico, A color of his own, Tillie and the wall, Fish is fish, Alexander and the wind-up mouse, It's mine, Let's make rabbits, Six crows, and Nicolas, where have you been? all include the theme of friendship. A plain book such as *Tico* could be combined with Marcus Pfister's shiny book *The rainbow fish* for more attractive illustrations. Although the visual images differ, both books have a similar story. *Tico* gives away his golden feathers one by one and makes people happy. In the end, his dream becomes true and he becomes a part of the black birds' community. On the other hand, the rainbow fish has beautiful shimmering scales but refuses to give away any of them. He becomes lonely. Just then the wise octopus advises him to give away his scales and pass one scale to each of his friends. Finally, only one scale remains on his body, but he is pleased with having many friends in return. Based on the books in this category, students would be able to discuss about their own friends. Students could then do

an activity to find some great features of their friends. (see Appendix 2).

Family

An extraordinary egg, *Frederick*, *Little Blue and Little Yellow* include the theme of family. They also deliver the message of accepting differences. Frederick, the mouse, is very different from the other mice. He is thought to be lazy because he does not do anything while the rest are gathering food and getting ready for winter. When the winter comes, they soon consume their food, and Frederick's turn has come. Nobody knew that Frederick was gathering sunlight, colors, and words to make everyone happy. After introducing the books of *Frederick* and *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, students could discuss about the roles of their family members. Discussion on their special individual contributions like Frederick would also be helpful for students to get to know each other better.

In the story of *An extraordinary egg*, the frogs believe the baby coming out of an egg will be a chicken. When they meet the mother of the baby, they suddenly realize it was an alligator. They are all surprised and laugh at their misunderstanding. Based on this story, students could share mistakes and misunderstandings they have experienced.

Self-awareness

Many of Lionni's books include the theme of self-awareness. Another important message in this category is that "being different can be an advantage." *Cornelius*, for example, is a rare crocodile who can walk upright. One day, he meets

a monkey and becomes friends. The monkey teaches him some acrobatic actions. At first, the other crocodiles seem uninterested. However, later when Cornelius looks back, he sees his companions all trying to copy him and he becomes proud of himself. *Fish is fish* is a story of friendship between a fish and a frog. The fish is envious of the frog that can see the world on land. Later, he realizes that "fish is fish" and learns to appreciate himself for who he is.

Since these two books are about different animals, it would be interesting for a teacher to have students discuss the similarities and differences in these animals. In the next step, the teacher could ask students to develop a venn diagram for the two animals in each book (Hollenbeck, 1999, p.12).

My responsibility

The main characters of *Swimmy*; *Tico*; *Frederick*; *Tillie and the wall*; *Greentail mouse*; *Matthew's dream*; *Geraldine, the music mouse*; and *Nicolas, where have you been?* are all described as being responsible in their roles: Swimmy and Tillie both work as the leader of the group to achieve a goal. Nicolas and the Greentail mouse serve as mediators to stop conflict. Matthew and Geraldine make their dreams come true as an artist and as a musician. Taking the examples of Matthew and Geraldine, students would be able to discuss their dreams and favorite occupations.

Solidarity

Swimmy, *It's mine*, *Tillie and the wall*, and *A color of his own* describe the sense of "togetherness". Through the characters appearing in the book, readers would get a wonderful feeling

when the story reaches its highlight. Based on the books in this category, students would be able to introduce some problems in their communities and discuss the solutions with a group. They could also discuss their wonderful experiences with their friends in the past.

Peace

This is one of the important themes of Lionni's books. *It's mine*, *Six crows*, *Greentail mouse*, *Little Blue and Little Yellow*, and *Nicolas, where have you been?* deliver a strong message of peace. There is also a key character, although not always a major one, in each book (e.g., a toad, an owl, a greentail mouse, Nicolas) who plays an important role to unite everyone in the story.

Lesson plan for retelling a story (Please click to see the latter part of my video clips at the end of this paper)

I chose the book *It's mine* for this retelling activity. Not many characters appear in this book, therefore, it would be appropriate for a small class of less than 10 students. I had six students for this demo lesson. They are all elementary school 4th graders and their English learning-experience was 2 to 3 years. They usually attend 45 minute lessons every week with a native-speaking English teacher.

The story is basically about three frogs that always quarrel and remain selfish. When a flood occurs, they realize the importance of sharing and solidarity through the help of a toad. They learned to live happily together and to share joy towards the end.

In order to conduct this retelling activity, I created a short

play based on this story (see Appendix 3). The activity is designed for one 70 minute lesson. However, it can be delivered over two lessons or more. In such a case, the teacher would be able to ask students to draw background pictures, prepare more lines to deliver in speech, and spend more time for practice. Students would also take turns in the narration.

The materials students would need are: some chopsticks, stiff paper, scissors, pencils and erasers, crayons or coloring markers, and scotch-tape.

Flow of the activity

<Warm-up exercise>

- Pointing to something belonging to the teacher, the teacher says, "It's mine."
- Pointing to something belonging to everyone, the teacher says, "It's ours."
- Students are guided to do the same

<Main activity>

- Teacher reads the book *It's mine*
- Introduce the book *Look-alike animals* and see if students can distinguish frogs from toads which appear in the book *It's mine*
- Compare the photos of *Look-alike animals* with the illustrations of *It's mine*
- Ask students which illustration is a frog (or toad)
- Students read aloud *It's mine* with a tape-recorded

voice

- Make props
 - *Because of time limitations, the teacher may prepare ‘background’ props and students only make props of the major characters
- Each student chooses their part to play. (Teacher reads the narration part.)
- Setting up the background pictures
- Practice “motion” of the props while the teacher reads along
- Practice “motion” of the props with the tape-recorded voice
- Practice the lines of the characters
- Practice the lines of the characters by moving the props
- Rehearsal
- Performance

Lesson plan for recreation of a story (Please click to see the latter part of my video clips at the end of this paper)

I designed the lesson of story-recreation based on Lionni’s *The biggest house in the world* which is about a little snail who always wanted the biggest house. The snail finally learned the lesson to appreciate itself as it is. In order for students to create a story based on this book, I

also introduced some other relevant books to have them brainstorm before starting to develop their illustrations and stories. The books I introduced were: *Torikaekko Chibizo* by Naoko Kudo, and *Mixed-up chameleon* and *A house for hermit crab* by Eric Carle.

The participants in this activity were the same 4th graders as in the previous activity: five for Lesson I and four for Lesson II. This whole activity is designed for two separate lessons, and each lesson consists of 50 minutes. The materials for this lesson are: A4 cardstock paper (for pictures), copy paper (for texts), scissors or cutters, pencils and erasers, and crayons or coloring markers.

Flow of the activity

[Lesson I]

<Warm-up exercise>

- Teacher introduces the books *Torikaekko Chibizo* and *Mixed-up chameleon* to the students
- Next the teacher briefly explains *A house for hermit crab* and reads *The biggest house in the world*
- Brainstorming for recreation of story

<Main activity>

- Teacher explains how to make a mini-book with A4 paper
- Students make two mini-books: one is with the cardstock and the other is with the regular copy paper

- Complete drawings in the cardstock book
- Teacher discusses with each student how to develop their own story

[Lesson II]

- Teacher discusses with each student how to develop their own story
- Students copy the teacher's writing of their own stories in the regular copy paper-book
 - *If students are beginners, it would be difficult to copy both pictures and lines in the same mini-book, therefore, I would suggest making them separately.
- Practice reading
- Each student shows their completed book and reads it in front of the class

The teacher could allow more time for each activity depending on the flow of the class. In addition, if time for another lesson is available, I would suggest that teachers ask students to rewrite the lines and draw the pictures again to make one larger book. This would provide a good review of the story for students.

Results

Preschoolers

Preschoolers tend to enjoy the simple activities such as drawing circles with mixed-colors or coloring a chameleon based on the books *Little Blue and Little Yellow* and *A color*

of his own in the English classroom. (Please click to see the latter part of my video clips at the end of this paper) In addition, interesting worksheets such as “Make a story cube” (Hollenbeck, 1999, p.20), “Keep on going!” (p.37), and “Fancy feelings” (p.57) are likely to work effectively for preschool English. In “Make a story cube,” the students were enjoying drawing the changes of colors of Little Blue and Little Yellow according to the story, cutting out the picture sheet, and making a story-dice at the end. The other two activity sheets were also easy for young children to learn the pattern of the snail-shells and match the pictures of facial expression with English words based on the story *Nicolas, where have you been?*

Preschoolers seemed to be able to enhance their imagination and come to understand the stories of Leo Lionni more when the teacher introduces the picture book and a video of the same title. The book such as *Frederick*, for instance, was difficult for preschoolers to understand at first. However, they became very excited about the story and its main character after watching the video. It was the same for the book *It's mine!* While reading the picture book, students looked rather uninterested. Later when they watched the video, they seemed to understand the story more clearly, and a few students even spoke along with the video while watching.

Elementary school students

Leo Lionni's books seem to be a suitable textbook for elementary school English learners. As is mentioned in the beginning of this paper, some of Lionni's stories have already been incorporated into Japanese language textbooks. In addition, some of his books such as *Swimmy* are easy to

reproduce as a drama or a musical.

Both the retelling and recreation activities I conducted for elementary school students seemed to motivate students' learning attitudes. They were enthusiastic about remembering their lines to perform the retelling of the story *It's mine*. The students were able to distinguish frogs from toads while studying the characters of the book. After completing their own mini-books based on *The biggest house in the world*, the students were enthusiastic to do the extra work at home: remaking larger books to review their own stories.

Examining the stories from their mini-books, one student created the story titled *The smallest house in the world*. Another student wrote about a fish that wished to become a different underwater creature. Another student created a story about himself. As the main character, he wanted to go out to different place everyday against his mother's advice. However, he is involved in an accident everywhere he goes. Finally, he regrets that he didn't follow his mother's advice. One female student created a story of a bird that desired to be a human being. Another female student created a story of a cat whose favorite season is spring, but the cat does not appreciate it very much. Later, when the cat sees cherry blossoms, she suddenly realizes that she dearly loves spring after all.

Discussion

The books of Leo Lionni include various themes. Some of the popular stories have already been incorporated into Japanese language textbooks for elementary school students.

Lionni's picture books would be applicable for second language learning as well because of the popularity and the quality of the stories. My demo lessons revealed that the stories of Lionni's books would contribute greatly for enhancing the imagination of young learners of English.

I would encourage teachers to use Lionni's books for retelling and story-recreation activities. When the class size is large, it is better to divide the class into small groups and let students do these activities separately. It would also be interesting to make the whole class perform in front of an audience based on the stories of Lionni's books. In this way, students would be able to share the story with their parents and friends.

For preschoolers, I would also suggest that teachers use interesting worksheets, other than coloring sheets, provided in the teachers' manuals. There is also potential to combine Lionni's books with audio/visual materials of the same titles to allow younger students to explore the stories more.

I believe picture books have the potential to be modified as effective textbooks for language learning. I hope other teachers will find them useful and try to create many more activities.

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Resources used for lesson plans

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- Lionni, L. (1987). *The biggest house in the world*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Useful web-sites of teaching ideas based on the books by Leo Lionni

- <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/lionni.htm>
- <http://www.kiddyhouse.com/Teachers/Literature/LeoL.html>
- <http://www.randomhouse.com/kids/lionni/>
- http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=263

Appendix 1

Application of Leo Lionni's picture books for Japanese L1 textbooks

- [1992] (number out of six publishers who selected the titles)
- | | |
|---------|--|
| Grade 2 | It's mine (1), Alexander and the wind-up mouse (2), Swimmy (1) |
| Grade 3 | Nicolas, where have you been? (1) |
| Grade 4 | Frederick (1) |
- [1996]
- | | |
|---------|--|
| Grade 2 | It's mine (1), Alexander and the wind-up mouse (1), Swimmy (1) |
| Grade 3 | Nicolas, where have you been? (1) |
| Grade 4 | Frederick (1) |

[2000]

Grade 2 It's mine (1), Alexander and the wind-up mouse (1), Swimmy (1)

Grade 4 Frederick (1)

[2004]

Grade 2 It's mine (1), Alexander and the wind-up mouse (1), Swimmy (1)

[2005]

Grade 2 Alexander and the wind-up mouse (1), Swimmy (1)

Appendix 2

Positive notes activity

*Formation-groups, circle

*Things to use-envelopes, cards, pens, coloring pencils, etc.

1. Prepare an envelope with (group members minus 1) cards inside for each person.
2. Form groups of 3 or 4 and sit in a circle.
3. Students pass their envelopes to the next person and are asked to write down one *positive* comment on the card inside and draw a picture on the envelope.
4. When they have all received envelopes, they open them and share their list of *strengths*.
5. Discuss with the group members what they thought about them.

Appendix 3

A short play based on the book "It's mine"

Student A (Milton): The water is mine!

Student B (Rupert): The earth is mine!

Student C (Lydia): The air is mine!

Students D & E (Toad): Stop talking! No peace.

Student A: [Grab the worm] It's mine!

Students B & C: No, It's mine!

Student F (Weather): Lightning! Thunder!

Students A, B & C: [Turn to Toad] You saved us!
Thank you, Toad!

Students D & E: You're welcome.

Student F: It's peaceful. It's beautiful.

Everybody: It's ours!

Appendix 4

Book titles and themes

						Uniqueness	Friendship	Simple & Easy	Self-awareness	Solidarity	Contrast	Family	Responsibility	Peace
A busy year						√	√							
A color of his own							√	√	√	√				
Alexander and the wind-up mouse						√	√				√			
An extraordinary egg						√	√					√		
Cornelius							√		√					
Fish is fish							√		√					
Flea story						√			√					
Frederick									√			√	√	
Greentail mouse									√	√				√
Inch by inch						√		√						
It's mine!							√			√				√
Let's make rabbits						√	√				√			
Let's play								√						
Little Blue and Little Yellow						√	√	√				√		√
Nicolas, where have you been?							√						√	√
On my beach there are many pebbles						√		√						
Pezzettino						√			√					
Six crows							√							√
Swimmy									√	√			√	
The alphabet tree								√						
The biggest house in the world						√			√					
Tico							√						√	√
Tillie and the wall							√			√				√