

# Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

## Teaching the Momotaro story to children using English

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The authors discuss the background and characteristics of the popular Japanese children's story, *Momotaro*, the storytelling art, *kamishibai*, and the card game, *karuta*, and consider their value as English teaching tools. They then describe how classes of public and private elementary school students were introduced to *Momotaro* in simplified English using *kamishibai* and *karuta*. Finally, based on their observations of the children during the lessons, the children's responses to a survey, and the comments of parents who had watched a lesson, they analyze the effectiveness of this approach and consider the significance for Japanese children of sharing together the culture and customs of Japan using English.

「桃太郎」は児童が一番よく知っている昔話であろう。日本独自の紙芝居は、演じ手と聞き手が絵物語を一体になって楽しむものである。カルタは教育や娯楽のゲームとして日本で発展し、子どもたちが好む遊びである。ここではまず、「桃太郎」・紙芝居・カルタの背景と特徴を述べ、これらを児童英語教育に用いる効果について考える。次に、公立・私立小学校において簡単な英語で書かれた「桃太郎」を紙芝居やカルタの手法により取り入れた実践例を紹介する。最後に、この試みを授業でおこなった際の児童の様子とアンケートの回答、授業を参観した保護者のコメントをもとにこの試みについての分析を行い、日本の子どもたちにとって日本の文化・習慣を英語で分かち合うことについての意味を考える。

**W**ithin the literature, traditions, and customs of Japan lies a great wealth of resources for the teaching of English. These resources may be found still fresh in the minds of children, who have likely become familiar with many of the stories, songs, and games of their culture



before doing much more than mouth the ABC song. If we can make some of what the children know in their own language come to life in a form and level of English that they can understand, enjoy, and reproduce, might we not begin to create bridges from the culture of Japan to the world beyond? The authors describe here how they introduced the popular children's story, *Momotaro*, using the storytelling art, *kamishibai*, and the card game, *karuta*, to public and private elementary school students, and analyze the response of the students and their parents to this approach.

### The *Momotaro* story

*Momotaro* is the story of a boy “born” from a peach found floating down a river by an old, childless woman. She and her husband name the boy “*Momotaro*” (*Momo* (peach) and *taro* (a typical boy's name)). They raise him, and then see him off to fight a band of demons that have been troubling their village. *Momotaro* leads a dog, monkey, and pheasant to help him defeat the demons and bring home the treasure the demons have stolen. *Momotaro* was published as a paperback in the Edo era and then as a picture book. With its inclusion in national school textbooks during the Meiji Era, it became known throughout Japan. It ranks at the top of the five most popular stories in Japanese children's literature (*Nihon Minwa no Kai*, 2002).

For Ikuta (2003), the stories are important for children today because they carry the message, “this is ‘how to live’ that for hundreds of years has been passed down by our ancestors” (p. 12). *Momotaro* teaches care for parents, returning kindness, striving for justice, working together in harmony, and other virtues long esteemed in Japan.

### *Kamishibai*

In *kamishibai* (*kami* (paper) and *shibai* (drama)), a story is illustrated scene-by-scene on separate sheets of large paper cards. On the back of each page, the lines are written so that the storyteller can tell the story while facing the listeners. In turn, each card is shown and the story told dramatically in a kind of “paper-theater” that is part of the daily routine for children in nursery schools and kindergartens throughout Japan.

*Kamishibai* developed in Showa Japan as a form of street theater (Suzuki, 2007). In the 1990's, it became known around Asia, and especially in Vietnam and Laos (Kamiji & Jido Toshokan Kenkyukai, 1999).

*Kamishibai* differs from the normal reading of a picture book in that the pictures are large and clear, and can be seen from a distance. Also, while a picture book can stand alone as a complete work, *kamishibai* is not simply the *kami*, or pictures; the drama (*shibai*) of the performer and his or her interaction with the audience is what makes *kamishibai*. As the performer moves through the story, he or she leads the audience to wonder, “What is coming next?” and heightens a sense of expectation or suspense in the timing, speed, and style of taking away the top picture to reveal the next scene. The performer may hide behind the picture, then jump out; or he or she may choose and improvise lines for the story to communicate with his or her given audience and invite their participation. The emotions of the participants are thus drawn out in the storytelling process. Performer and audience together share the story and the feelings it evokes in the same time and space (Matsui, 1998). We have found that when children hear a phrase spoken with emotional

intensity, it tends to stay in their minds. Yet even with this intensity, *kamishibai* can be enjoyed in a relaxed atmosphere (Kamiji & Jido Toshokan Kenkyukai, 1999). In the EFL classroom, the *kamishibai* pictures partnered with the actions of the storyteller meet the criteria of Ur (1984): Some kind of visual clue is essential in any language-learning activity based on face-to-face communication.

### Karuta

In the game of *karuta*, small picture cards are placed face up in view of the two or more players. For each picture card, there is a matching card containing a written description of the picture. When the caller reads a description, the players vie to be the first to slap and take the picture card described. This continues until the cards have all been taken; the player with the most cards wins.

The word “*karuta*” (*carta*) was introduced to Japan by the Portuguese (Sugiura & Gillespie, 2004). It became a popular diversion, but also helped generations of children learn proverbs (*kotowaza*), poems, the *hiragana* letters, and much more. It is regularly introduced in English teaching materials for children.

### Rationale

Is there a need to teach Japanese people how to share their culture using English? Honna (2008) states, “Japanese people generally see international understanding as learning about other cultures” (p. 162). Therefore, “we need to provide our students with more opportunities to read and write and talk and hear about Japan in English” (p. 163).

Suzuki (2002) asserts that “self-expression by Japanese people and telling others about Japan is the common, linked purpose of Japanese English education” (p. 190), and that for true cultural interchange, Japanese culture should be shared in English. For this, “Japanese people must have confidence and pride in and true appreciation of their language and culture” (p. 185). Along the same lines, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT, 2008) states its goal for foreign language activities for elementary school students as follows:

Through foreign languages, to experientially deepen understanding of language and culture, to encourage an attitude that takes the initiative in communicating, to become familiar with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages, to cultivate communication ability. (p. 8)

For the past twenty years, the authors have been introducing Japanese culture and customs to children using English and see many benefits in this approach: the content is somewhat familiar, making it easier to relate to and grasp; children become more aware of their own culture, and present it with pride and confidence; opportunities can be created for using English during break times at school, in projects at home, and with foreign guests (Aiba, Fujiwara, & Byrd, 2008). In the study described here we continued using this approach by asking the following research questions:

- How would children react to learning a Japanese story (Momotaro) in English class?
- After children had been taught Momotaro using *kamishibai*, a song, and *karuta*, would they be able

to remember and reproduce the English of the story?

## Students

We introduced *Momotaro* at both a public and a private elementary school. At the public school, where we taught 290 fifth and sixth graders, students only have ten 45-minute English classes per year (up from five lessons the previous year). At the private school, where we taught 167 first and second graders, English is emphasized, and students have two 40-minute classes a week, a total of 75 lessons per year.

## Materials

We prepared large Momotaro *kamishibai* pictures (*kamishibai* stories with the text in Japanese are available from many libraries and a few publishers) and wrote a simplified, English version of the story and song faithful to the originals (see Appendix 1). Some Japanese words with particular significance were left in, giving the story a comfortable and humorous familiarity. For example, the rhythmic phrase listeners immediately associate with the *Momotaro* story, “*donburako*,” the motion and sound of a peach floating down the river, we translated “bobbing up and down.” When we translated the *Momotaro* song, which tells the central part of the story, we kept the familiar name “*Momotaro*” and added the English equivalent “Peach Boy.” As Paul (2005) states, “the EFL student in Asia often has little chance outside of the classroom to encounter English, necessitating much repetition of the target vocabulary and expressions” (p. 44). In light of this, we ensured that both the story and song employ much repetition.

We made the *karuta* cards in matching pairs, with a scaled-down version of each scene of the *kamishibai* pictures on one card, and the corresponding story line on the other.

## Method

We first had the students sing the *Momotaro* song in Japanese, as this helps to bring the class together, and refresh the story in their minds. Following the tradition of *kamishibai*, we then told the story, one picture at a time, with tone of voice showing the surprise, wonder, fear, and triumph of the successive scenes. After the first telling, the children were ready to repeat line-by-line, following the rhythm of the teacher. Gestures and play-acting also enlivened the story and aided in remembering it. Ur (1984) writes about listening experiences: “the occasional introduction of pleasurable components like songs and stories into English lessons can improve students’ motivation and general morale, and show the language in a new light” (p. 63). So, we sang the part of the story told by the song, making for a change of pace from speaking, and holding the students’ interest.

In subsequent lessons, we followed up rehearsals of the song and story with *karuta* games. Students worked in groups of two to six with *karuta* cards spread out on the table. In the first step, students put the cards on the table in the order of the story, saying, “Here’s number one, etc.” The picture cards were numbered to make the ordering easier. An easy activity like this can build students’ confidence and add familiarity to the story and pictures. In a second step, again with the picture cards spread randomly on the table, the teacher read or sang one line (one scene) of the

story, and students pointed to the matching card. Rather than the traditional competitive *karuta*, where a stronger student can collect an unequal portion of the cards, a kind of “cooperative *karuta*,” where all students together point at the card called out, then turn it over, can help encourage weaker students and build group unity. In the third step, the students repeated the line after the teacher as they tried to be the first to slap the card. Finally, the students retold the story, using whatever words or phrases they had remembered as they put the cards in order. These activities helped our students retell the story. As we watched our students enthusiastically participate in the story, sing the song, and play *karuta*, we agreed with Pinter’s (2006) observation, that “after children have been exposed to English through listening, they soon want and are able to participate in interactions with the teacher and each other” (p. 56).

### Survey results and analysis

286 out of 290 students at the public school, and 162 out of 167 students at the private school responded to a survey conducted in December 2008. The students had practiced *Momotaro* and *karuta* for about 12 minutes out of each lesson, for a total of 60 minutes at the public school and 80 minutes at the private school.

In response to the first question, “How did you feel about learning the *Momotaro* story in English using *kamishibai*?” 94.4% of the private school (lower grade) students and 90.6% of the public school (upper grade) students said that they enjoyed studying *Momotaro* in English. It seems that actually participating (performing) in the *kamishibai* storytelling appealed to students. Even normally shy students

seemed to get caught up in telling the story, making for a sense of class unity, which was perhaps another reason for the enjoyment felt. Also, both the older and younger students spoke out in English with loud voices and did the actions. This was another point of interest for us, as older students, in our experience, sometimes lack the enthusiasm of younger children for expressing themselves orally in English.

Responding to the question, “Do you remember the *Momotaro* Peach Boy song?” 83.3% of the private school students and 75.5% of the public school students answered that they could completely or almost completely sing the English version of the *Momotaro* song. Over 95% of the students could sing at least in part. The survey of public school students was conducted one month after the last lesson, making their retention rate even more impressive. From this, we agree with Paul (2005) that songs stick with students.

In response to the question, “Do you want to learn more Japanese stories using English?” at the private school, 95.7% and at the public school 88.1% of the students answered that they wanted to learn more Japanese stories using English. 83.5% of the fifth and sixth graders answered specifically that, as they knew the story already, it was easy for them to understand it in English. Students were not questioned as to what kind of stories they would like to learn, but some students of both lower and upper grades wrote the specific names of stories. These results suggest that familiar L1 stories may be arranged as appealing materials for English study.

Responding to the question, “Did you like the *karuta* games?” 92.8% of the private school and 88.5% of the public

school students said *karuta* was enjoyable. Irrespective of their grade in school, *karuta* could be used to help students pleurably review, repeat, and in our observation, retain the story.

Asked, “What words do you remember?” the students wrote: “please give me one *kibi dango* cake,” “fight the demons,” “bobbing up and down,” etc., phrases that had been presented in a particularly expressive manner, and repeated both within the story and/or song. We observed that in the midst of the river of English words, to hear a peculiarly familiar word like “*kibi dango*” (millet cake) helped put students at ease and lighten the mood of the class, as well as in aiding retention of the surrounding or related English word(s) or phrases; use of such L1 words provide a sort of “hook” to the entire story and serve as a good bridge from the L1 to L2 experience (Aiba, Fujiwara, & Byrd, 2008).

Matsuhata (1983) points to the importance of leading young English learners to participate actively in listening to and acting out stories, playing games and singing songs, so that they learn to use the new words of the foreign language. Our survey and observations suggest that *Momotaro*, *kamishibai*, and *karuta* fill the bill.

### Parents' comments

Forty-four parents observed a grade two class at the private elementary school. Standing around the back and sides of the classroom, the parents took part in the lesson, and then freely wrote their reactions. In the class they observed, about 12 of the 40 minutes of the lesson were used for the *Momotaro kamishibai* activity.

All of the parents participating in the lesson wrote positive responses to the *Momotaro* lesson, the most common ones being the following: it looked like it was fun for the children to learn a Japanese story they knew well in English; the children could encounter English without anxiety and with enthusiasm.

Children were able to get involved, to see themselves as characters in the story and to naturally acquire the English of the story. On class observation days, some children are reluctant to speak in front of others, but as our students watched the *kamishibai* and got caught up in the story, they spoke the English lines naturally, without shyness or fear. *Kamishibai* seems to commend itself as a language learning approach that reduces anxiety and encourages participation.

### Conclusion

The *Momotaro kamishibai* and *karuta* approach described here seemed effective with our students. In both upper and lower grade elementary school classes, the great majority of students enjoyed repeating, singing, and dramatizing the *Momotaro* story. At times, we could hear the students during breaks doing this on their own and parents reported that their children reproduced the lines learned in class at home. English seems, if even in a small way, to have escaped from the classroom. We would hope that adapting L1 stories and adopting L1 methods as we demonstrated here might foster an appreciation of both English learning and of Japanese culture and customs, and so help cultivate a new generation of cheerful, communicating, culture-sharing Japanese learners of English.

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## Appendix 1

## Momotaro Peach Boy Story and Song

Momotaro *Peach Boy Story* (each line goes with a matching picture card)

1. Old Man, Old Woman
2. To the mountains, to the mountains, cut firewood
3. To the river, to the river, wash clothes
4. *Donburako!* Bobbing up and down!
5. I got it! I got it! I will take it home.
6. Oh my! Oh my! What a big peach!
7. Let's cut! Let's eat! Let's cut! Let's eat!
8. Oh my! Oh my! What a big, fine boy!
9. *Momotaro* Peach Boy! Eat, eat, eat!
10. Big, strong, smart, kind boy!
11. Oh no! Oh no! Big bad demons!
12. I'm making yummy *kibi dango* cakes.
13. Goodbye, Old Man. Goodbye, Old Woman.
14. (Dog) Please give me one *kibi dango* cake. (Bow wow)
15. (Monkey) Please give me one *kibi dango* cake. (Ki, ki, ki)
16. (Pheasant) Please give me one *kibi dango* cake. (Whoosh)
17. Demon's Island! Demons' Island!

18. Fight the demons! Fight the demons! Fight! Fight! Fight!

19. Good job, *Momotaro*, good job!

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*Momotaro Peach Boy Song*

*Momotaro* Peach Boy, *Momotaro-san*

桃太郎さん、桃太郎さん

Please give me one *kibi dango* cake.

お腰につけたきび団子

Please give me one *kibi dango* cake.

ひとつ私にくださいな。

I will give you one; I will give you one.

やりましょう。やりましょう。

If you come with me to fight the demons;

これから鬼の征伐に、

If you come with me to fight the demons.

ついて行くならやりましょう。

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