

Kamishibai in kindergarten: The magic of ancient Japanese storytelling with young learners

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Abstract

The art of Kamishibai also known as *paper drama* has been treasured by Japanese storytellers. As part of the annual multicultural school year in Argentina, EFL kinder teachers held a project to provide students with vivid, holistic and enriching experiences related to this ancient tradition. Students, whose native language is Spanish, were immersed in the Far eastern culture and literature in English. Could teachers involve students in the magical world of ancient Japan? How would they do it? Yoga sessions, tea ceremony and stories retold with the art of Kamishibai. After listening to many stories, students were ready to create their own in groups with the help of the teachers. Those stories were carefully prepared, illustrated and then narrated to other students and parents, following the art of the Kamishibai.

Keywords: English; Japanese; Kamishibai; kindergarten; literature.

Resumen

El arte del Kamishibai, conocido también como *teatro de papel*, es uno de los legados de los narradores japoneses. Como parte de la planificación institucional anual vinculada a la multiculturalidad en un colegio en Argentina, docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera llevaron a cabo un proyecto relacionado a esta tradición milenaria. Se introdujo a los alumnos (hablantes nativos de español) de manera vivencial a la literatura y cultura del lejano oriente. ¿Podrían los docentes hacer que sus alumnos se involucren con la magia del ancestral Japón? ¿Cómo lo harían? Clases de Yoga, la ceremonia del té y relato de historias contadas a través del arte del Kamishibai. Después de escuchar varias narraciones, los alumnos estaban listos para inventar sus propios cuentos. Estas historias fueron cuidadosamente elaboradas, ilustradas y luego narradas por los alumnos al resto del grupo y a sus familiares siguiendo las tradiciones del arte del Kamishibai.

Palabras clave: inglés; japonés; jardín de infantes; Kamishibai; literatura.

HOW OFTEN DO EFL teachers provide young students of a foreign language with a vivid experience related to literature? Do they usually truly invite them to feel and be surrounded by the universe of a certain story? At the same time, do teachers provide students with the time and opportunities to let sense re-creation in literature happen?

The following article describes a project that provoked reflection upon these matters. It was held with five-year-old students in a bilingual school in Buenos Aires, Argentina. As part of the institutional annual plan, some years ago, the school academic board decided to work on multiculturalism. EFL teachers working in kindergarten planned a project related to Kamishibai.

The art of Kamishibai, also known as paper drama, has been treasured by Japanese storytellers. It started many centuries ago in the Buddhist temples in Japan. Buddhists wanted people to embrace their values so they used to go to villages telling stories with a strong moral. They went around on their bikes and told short stories accompanied by pictures shown in a wooden stage. This traditional art of storytelling was passed on through generations. Kamishibai storytellers arrived in a town and clapped some wooden sticks to call villagers' attention. People used to sit near the wooden stage and listen to stories, especially children.

Kinder five EFL teachers at the mentioned school participated in an in-service session in which a storyteller introduced them to Kamishibai. After such a sensitive experience and further reading on the topic, the teachers thought of transmitting this ancient tradition to their students. It would be highly interesting, engaging, fruitful, and above all, mind opening.

Aims of the Project

The aim of the project was to expose students to certain elements of traditional Japanese culture and the art of Kamishibai in order to provide them with a meaningful experience.

This goal implied several objectives:

- To introduce students to Japanese culture through traditional costumes and their objects (tea ceremony–Kamishibai storytelling–Japanese music)
- To promote flexible picture-reading and sense-recreation: Multiple interpretations of the same picture and ordering of different sequences of a set of pictures to create a wide variety of stories
- To make student increase the oral understanding and production (fluency) of a wide number of linguistic exponents (grammar and vocabulary) in English: vocabulary (colours, adjectives, actions verbs, places) and grammar (simple past, affirmative)

Which activities should teachers prepare to fulfill these language and literature objectives? But most important, how would they introduce the topic and smoothly go through it without breaking the *holistic literature experience* into a set of activities?

Miss Lee: Introductions of the Character and Japanese Culture

The EFL teachers worked in pairs. This means that each group of students spent a complete shift (afternoon or morning) five days a week with two EFL teachers. This organisation allowed teachers to plan the project in the following way.

One of the teachers would be in charge of the group while the other would get dressed up as a Japanese storyteller. Projects in kindergarten usually work very well when a character, a problem or a story organises the sequence of activities giving them sense and unity.

That is how a certain day, within the daily routine, Miss Lee (one of the teachers dressed as a Japanese lady) entered the classroom. We noted that the students felt the slow pace and calm of the Japanese culture through the movements and tone of voice of this character.

Miss Lee visited students on many occasions: sharing the tea ceremony or doing a Yoga class. Students loved Miss Lee and every day they waited for her visit. After some encounters and carefully prepared meaningful experiences related to the Japanese culture, students were ready to know the art of Kamishibai. For that special day, teachers turned the classroom into a Japanese setting. There were no chairs, no tables; only Japanese music and the wooden stage waiting for students to come and enjoy the magic of this ancient art. Miss Lee was in the classroom when the students arrived from the playground with the other teacher. They were asked to take their shoes off and to enter in complete silence. That was the beginning. At that moment the teachers knew that they were offering their students an *extraordinary* experience (See [Appendix A](#)). Every day routine would be temporarily interrupted and an event of a different order would be introduced: the opening door to feel the power of a different culture through literature. And that was it. Students were amazed by Miss Lee's first story: her movements, her pauses, her words.

Many other stories were told after that day. Each of them created the same special atmosphere. There was no written word. Literature was in the pictures, in Miss Lee's voice, and in the children's mind. Internet videos showed the way Kamishibai storytellers interact with the audience

A panel related to the project was set on the classroom wall. As the stories were introduced, teachers and students filled the panel with pictures and information related to the stories: key vocabulary, characters etc. (See [Appendix A](#))

Some of the stories teachers based their oral narration on were: *Ming Lo Moves the*

Mountain by Arnold Lobel and *Ruby's Wish* by Shirin Yim Brigdes.

Turning Point in the Project: From Listener to Storyteller

Up to this moment teachers had exposed students to the Japanese culture and had provided them with full immersion in which they were the listeners of the Japanese stories. In this second part of the project, students were expected to become more actively involved.

One day, Miss Lee brought her wooden stage and clapped her sticks to call students attention to tell a story as usual. But that day something *odd* would happen. There were no pictures in the wooden stage, but blank pages. Teachers did not mean to tell any story at all that day. They wanted students to create their own. As soon as Miss Lee opened the wooden stage and children saw no picture, they spontaneously offered themselves to invent a story.

This part of the project was devoted to create a short story and the main activities within were:

1. Dividing students into 3 groups
2. Meeting several times with each group to think about characters, setting and the plot:
 - Students chose the setting of the story from options provided by the teachers
 - Students invented character through guided descriptions or used characters from previously stories told by Miss Lee
 - The students created the beginning, development and ending of a short story. Each part of the story included two or three sentences in English. If the students did not have the language necessary to do so, teachers provided students with different phrases or words. The panel mentioned in the previous section was a helpful source of relevant vocabulary
3. Drawing and colouring the pictures
4. Telling the stories within each group to enrich it linguistically: Students from the same group told the complete story to the teacher using the pictures. As they did, the teacher fostered all members' participation in order to enrich the retelling of the story. If the span of students' grammar structures or vocabulary were not so wide, the teachers provided them with more words and phrases in order to have an understandable version
5. Finding a name for the story: Once all the members of the each group have a similar version of the story, students were invited to think of

possible names for the story. In some cases, remembering the names of the stories told by Miss Lee gave students a clue of interesting names: the name of the main character or the most interesting event or object in the story.

One group named the story *The Problem of the Moving House*. Its name shows the core subject of the plot. An old couple of Japanese villagers meet a wise man several times to find solutions for different problem in their house (for illustrations of the story created by the students see [Appendix B](#)).

Japanese Storytellers Themselves

Once the stories were ready, each group had the chance to tell the rest of the class and their parents their own story within the art of Kamishibai. This meant that the classroom was set like a Japanese room. (See [Appendix A](#)). The rest of the class took the shoes off, waited in silence while some Japanese music was played. The students as true storytellers followed the Kamishibai traditions (clapping the sticks, opening the wooden stage and showing the pictures, telling the story in a slow pace and with smooth movements). For that moment, the members of each group knew what part of the story he/she had to tell. Shy students, who did not want to speak but were part of the creation process, were assigned a special role: clapping the wooden sticks or opening the Kamishibai stage windows and show the pictures. When students lacked confidence or did not remember what to say, teachers or even other members in the groups provided the storyteller with some key words.

Final Comments

Throughout this project, students were immersed in the Far- eastern culture and literature. Could teachers involve students in the magical world of ancient Japan? The teachers' aim was to provide students with a *holistic and enriching experience*.

During the first part of the project students were invited to participate actively and holistically in meaning cultural experiences, led by the teachers especially through Miss Lee character. In the second part focused on the creation of stories within the Kamishibai art of storytelling. The cognitive and language demands were higher as production was required in order to create a story in group and share it orally with others. All the students increased their vocabulary bank. However, the words acquired by each student varied essentially according to the material used for each group's story. All students learned more than two verbs in Simple Past Tense, being verb *to go* one of the most commons. The chance of a real necessity to practice the story many time in order to tell it to others made most of the students increase their fluency and confidence

in speech production.

Japanese traditions and slow pace in speech and movements in oral literature created a turning point in the class atmosphere. For a month time, the classroom became Japan and pure magic emerged from children and teachers' hearts: Far eastern smells, sounds, images friendly mingled with everyone. The power of cultural clash made us discover ourselves in others.

Note

1. For appendices, follow these links: [Appendix A](#), [Appendix B](#).

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