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Boosting cultural awareness through short stories

One of the challenges facing instructors at the university level throughout Japan (although not exclusively limited to Japan) is how to come to terms with a mandate to afford students a full range of learning opportunities in spite of their weak grasp of grammatical structures and nascent vocabulary. Most instructors likely will agree that in addition to developing students' knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, we also need to give them ways to reflect on and appreciate various cultures' customs, attitudes and beliefs through explicit instruction, activities and interaction with authentic literature. I tried to achieve some of these using one story in my book of short stories.

Many of my students struggle due to their lack of motivation to try to improve their English. For them English just isn't their strong suit. Ask them to make a duplicate of a high precision brass connector screw to replace one you lost on your high-end speakers and they can acquit themselves admirably. But ask them to read two A-4 pages of text and it's similar to demanding some of us to negotiate two A-4 pages of kanji.

I had thought about buying sets of graded readers and using them with Moodle Reader, but to spend a lot of money and set up the system for ultimately what would be a small number of students, seemed counterproductive. Therefore, at the time when a new print-on-demand machine was being trialed, I tested it with a small, bespoke run. I rewrote some selected stories to suit my students' level that I had originally written for native readers, then supplemented them with some language-building/confirmation activities and published *Fifteen Little Stories for English Language Learners*. The stories ranged from 400-1400 words, some were distinctly foreign in theme. Several of these stories were better received than I had been expecting. In particular, one about an experience in China entitled "The World's Loudest Phone Call," worked well with two groups of students with the weakest English skills because it offered them an opportunity to read English out loud in an over the top way. I had encouraged them to compete in teams. Building on their enjoyment, they were asked to survey foreign students and staff at

this university from six countries about telephone and train manners, eating habits, classroom conduct and group dynamics. A desire to introduce students to simple, but culturally authentic content, turned into incidental values clarification. In particular, students who hadn't respected Chinese (and others) changed their thinking.¹

For supplementary language practice, I gave students a 10-question Moodle quiz, introduced them to Quizlet so they could try self-study and used Eyercize online speedreading software to make them aware they needed to try to read at a constant rate.

1. Recent surveys have shown that around 60% of Japanese oppose immigration, particularly from China. See McNabb, R. Gregg (2015). The Immigration Situation in Japan: a Follow-up from 2006. *SIST Bulletin*. Vol. 23. (49-57).