

# ***Mind the Culture Gap* edited by Susan Balogh and Jodi Lindsay: Live Readings of Local Literature to Foster Intercultural Understanding**

**Meredith Stephens**

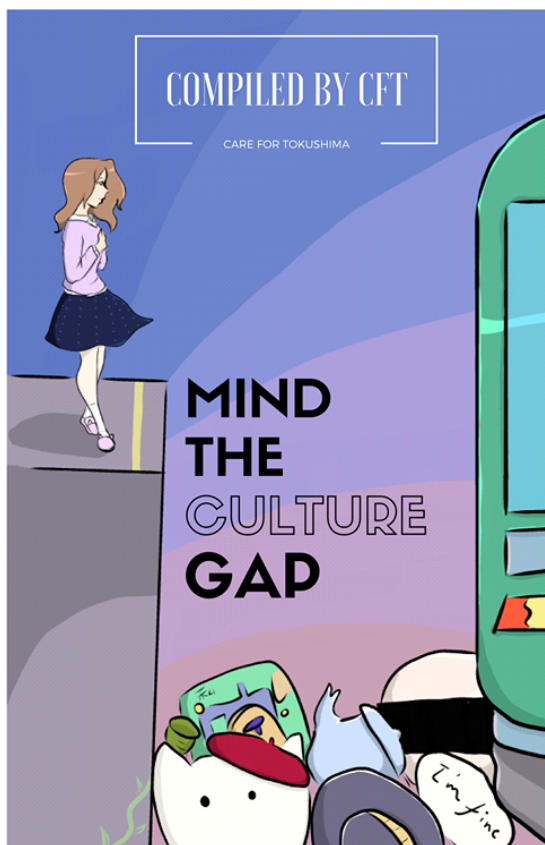
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## **Abstract**

Susan Balogh and Jodi Lindsay compiled an anthology of anecdotes involving cross-cultural misunderstanding in both English and Japanese, by both Japanese and expatriate writers. The expression “Mind the Gap” is taken from the London underground, where passengers are warned to watch their step when entering a train; this is a metaphor for the pitfalls of cross-cultural communication. I decided to use this as a textbook for required Communicative English classes for second year students majoring in Engineering, Maths and Biology. This paper details the various activities I used to teach discrete skills of reading, listening, spelling, vocabulary, and collocation, and the top-down skill of summarizing a story. Beyond simply providing practice for these language skills, these stories provide humorous illustrations of pragmatic failure, and remind students that there is much more to learning a language than the mechanical skills that tend to dominate many language classrooms.

*Keywords:* local stories, bimodal input, reading-while-listening



The purpose of this project was twofold. Firstly, I wanted to introduce local literature to my students. Rather than use course books set in distant locales and featuring unfamiliar activities, I wanted to introduce stories written by local people, both Japanese and expatriate. I was hoping to build upon prior knowledge (Hattie & Yates, 2014) and make a connection between the known and the unknown, by featuring local people's stories in the less familiar language of English. Local literature is not only familiar; it is also important. Part of the university mission is to serve locally; creating and disseminating local literature is one way of doing this.

The second purpose was to implement a Reading-while-listening (RWL) mode in the classroom. The short stories provided an ideal opportunity to conduct weekly RWL. The class was entitled Communicative English, having been translated from *Hasshingata Eigo* in Japanese. It is a required course for second year students who have already completed Basic English and Thematic English in their first year. *Hasshin* means to send out, which implies speaking skills. In order to speak, students need a strong foundation in listening comprehension. The RWL component of these lessons was designed to provide a solid foundation for the speaking component of the lesson, which was implemented in the second half of the lesson (to be discussed later).

### **How the Stories were Compiled**

Susan Balogh of Shikoku University initiated a project of collecting stories involving cross-cultural mishaps in Japan, and by Japanese visitors overseas. Many were written by a group of local Japanese citizens, ranging in age from 40 to 75, who have been meeting to discuss social and environmental issues in English since the 1990s. The members wrote short stories with the aim of bridging cross-cultural distance. The editors supplemented the stories with contributions from international residents who are living or who have lived in Tokushima. The international contributors were from America, Canada, Australia, the UK, Croatia and India. All of the stories were translated into Japanese by the Japanese group. Brooke Szucs was commissioned to provide the artwork. The book consists of 43 illustrated stories of between one and three pages each, and their Japanese translations.

This compilation was not designed to be a textbook, but as a community project. I was given a complimentary copy and decided to use it as a textbook with my Communicative English classes of second year students in required classes. To date I have used it for three semesters, with two classes each semester, and am currently using it for the fourth time. I considered that the students would appreciate stories written by another generation of writers from their own culture.

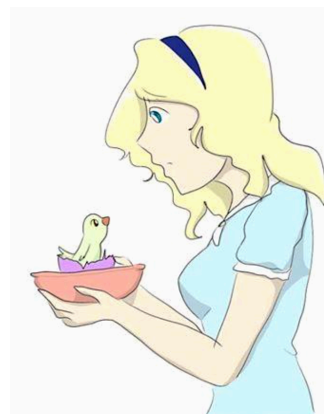
## Benefits of a Japanese Translation

Some argue that English should be taught exclusively in English, and reject the role of the L1: “Belief in direct method is so deeply ingrained, and antagonism to translation so intense” (Cook, 2010, p. 52). Nevertheless, there is an alternative view that the support of the L1 can play an important role. Translation is “a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown” (Cook, p. 155). Many beginning students’ reading “strategy” consists of word for word decoding, but as Harold Palmer cautioned long ago, “reading should be as fluent or natural as speaking or hearing, not the word-for-word puzzling out of meaning” (Masukawa, 1978, p. 246). The Japanese translation provides the students with an overview of what to expect, and frees them from the cumbersome task of decoding. The students were asked to spend a few minutes reading the Japanese translation of the weekly story, before the teacher read it aloud to them in English.

## The Stories

One of the most amusing stories was “Yes, I wasn’t Careless” by Yoshito Hojo. This story described his stint as a farming trainee in Minnesota. He mistakenly reversed a skid-steer loader (a multi-purpose farming machine) into a barn. The boss berated him: “Get off the machine at once! Look at this mess! Weren’t you driving carefully enough?” Hojo replied “Yes” (meaning “No”) and continued to be berated by the boss. Hojo concluded, “ ‘Yes’ means ‘No’ and ‘No’ means ‘Yes’ in negative questions in English.”

Another entertaining anecdote was “What Kind of Eggs do you Like?” by Yoko Umetsu. Two American high school students were on a homestay visit at her house. In the morning Umetsu asked them “What kind of eggs do you like?” The guests were confused and asked back, “What kind of eggs do the Japanese eat?” Then she showed them some eggs in the fridge, and was tempted to reply “dragon eggs”, but didn’t because of her guests’ serious expression. She rephrased the question, “Do you like your eggs sunny-side up, or boiled, or maybe you would like an omelet?” The guests’ comprehension was indicated by their laughter, and Umetsu realized she should have asked, “How do you like your eggs?”



Suzanne Kamata provided two stories for this collection: “Sneaky Sneakers” and “Address Unknown,” both originally published in *Wingspan*. “Sneaky Sneakers” describes the common dilemma in Japan, of leaving the house, having put one’s shoes on, and then having to enter again to retrieve something that has been forgotten. She had to re-enter her house on her knees to claim her keys. Later she was visiting an American friend who was facing the same dilemma. However instead of crawling back inside the house on her knees, her friend entered the house boots and all. Kamata was shocked, and sought confirmation from a Japanese friend as to whether they sometimes did this too. Her friend confided that she might do this in winter, if her boots were on and no-one was watching, but that she would scold her children if they did the same.



Additional stories appear in Appendix A.

### **Class Activities**

#### **Reading while Listening**

In order to bring the stories to life I decided to deliver them according to the RWL mode rather than having the students do silent reading. RWL typically involves following print while listening to an audiobook; the latter supplies the prosody to the text to facilitate comprehension; “Audiobooks provide an excellent bridge between decoding and comprehension for struggling readers” (Friedland, Gilman, Johnson & Demeke, 2017, p. 83). RWL benefits the learning of vocabulary, attitudes to reading, and listening (Isozaki, 2018), reading comprehension (Woodall, 2010; Friedland et al. 2017), and the speed and accuracy of listening (Chang, 2011).

Rather than RWL to audiobooks, the current project consisted of RWL to the teacher’s live readings. A live reading unifies the reader with the audience, and the group as a whole (Ong, 1982). More recently, neuroscientific research reports increased brain activity in the areas of social cognition and reward during live interaction. This heightened activity is more evident during the act

of jointly attending to something than when attending to something on one's own (known as "solo attention") (Redcay, 2010). The act of shared reading entails both the readers and listeners jointly paying attention to the same story in the same place and at the same time. This notion of live interaction was the rationale for providing the live reading as the students jointly attended to the text. Each week a particular story was read aloud three times to the class, while the class completed a mini-test consisting of a synonym replacement exercise (see also Stephens, 2017, for another example). Ten words from the text were substituted with synonyms chosen by the teacher, and the students had to record both the original words and their synonyms, and submit them to be marked. (A sample of this mini-test appears in Appendix B.) This mini-test ensured their attention while the story was being read aloud. They were permitted to consult their partner and their dictionaries during this exercise.

Previous research at this institution had indicated that many students preferred listening to a live reading than to an audio-recording (Stephens, Kurihara, Kamata & Nakashima, 2018). This may be because of the group chemistry between the reader and audience, and the communication of the reader's interpretation of the text. According to Lakoff (2008), mirror-neuron circuitry leads the interlocutors to connect face and body movement with the emotions. Van Wassenhove (2013) explains that observation of the movement of the face while talking can facilitate comprehension by the listener. The importance for L2 learners of observing the integration of sound and lip movement was observed by Cheetham (2017). Furthermore, Sekiyama and Burnham (2008) explain that due to the phonological complexity of English, looking at the face of the speaker provides audio-visual integration. In the current study, the students spent much of their time looking at their books as the teacher was reading, but they did intersperse this with glancing at the teacher. Face-to-face communication was integral to the reading.

### **Spelling and Vocabulary**

Previously I had noticed that some students had trouble perceiving the sounds when I spelt out a word to them. For example, when I tried to spell out a word such as 'decipher' (d-e-c-i-p-h-e-r), some students had trouble decoding my spelling; they were unable to write down the letters I was sounding out without the provision of exaggerated pronunciation and repetition. I surmised that because English and Japanese pronunciations of letters of the alphabet were different, the students may need to habituate themselves to the English manner of sounding out of single letters. Therefore, I decided to introduce spelling dictations after the synonym replacement exercise. I chose ten words from the particular chapter from *Mind the Culture Gap* and spelt each word three

times to the class. I began by spelling the words slowly and carefully, and as the semester progressed, and the students' listening comprehension seemed to improve, I spelt them more quickly. After the test I wrote the words on the board and the students marked their own work, to encourage learner autonomy. Then I asked them to tell me their score in English as follows: "I got ten (nine/eight/seven) out of ten." I used this as an opportunity to teach sentence stress, by asking them to raise the pitch and volume, and increase the length of the salient word in the sentence: "I got ten (nine/ eight/ seven) out of ten."

The next exercise concerned vocabulary. I provided an oral gloss of each of the words in the spelling test, and the students had to retrieve them from the list. After this exercise I wrote the answers on the board and again students marked their own work. These exercises also appear in Appendix B.

### **Focus on Bottom-up and Top-down Language Skills**

The discrete English language skills featured in this lesson were reading, listening, spelling, vocabulary, and collocation. Nevertheless, focusing on discrete skills alone is inadequate. Students need to be able to work with the story as a unified whole. Nuttall (2005) reminds us that reading requires both bottom up and top down skills. In order to extend the focus to top down skills, first the students were advised to memorize specific collocations from the story, which they marked with highlighting pens. Then they were paired with the person sitting next to them. Partner A had the book open and Partner B had it closed. Partner B summarized the story to Partner A, incorporating the collocations. Partner A gave hints to Partner B when necessary. Five minutes later the students swapped roles. After this the process was repeated with new pairs formed by partnering with the person sitting behind or in front of them, and then with the person sitting on the diagonal behind or in front of them. In this way the students had up to three opportunities to practice summarizing the text using the specified collocations.

### **Reading in Different Voices**

Another activity which followed the listening component of the lesson was to have the students read the text in a variety of voices. Hattie & Yates (2014) explained the classroom practice of repeated reading during which the students read aloud to someone else, with the aim of improving fluency and prosody. Maley & Duff (2005) and Maley (2017) suggested a number of ways for students to read a text to each other in playful ways, to avoid the boredom that may come with repetition; for example students read successive sentences in a text to each other with dramatic delivery; one reading may be loud, then soft, then fast, then slow, then happy, then sad, and then

normal. They explained that the advantage of this is that the students become familiar with the text, and therefore their reading improves. I implemented their techniques as follows: students lined up in pairs, facing each other, in two rows from the front to the back of the classroom. I called out the manner in which the text was to be read (e.g. “Read loudly!”), and the students started to read to each other as they had been instructed. Then I instructed the member of each pair on the right to move one position clockwise, and the reading was repeated with a different partner. I repeated this process, regularly asking the partner on the right to move clockwise with each reading, and asked the students to read the text in the manner I called out each time. This activity provoked both engagement and hilarity and ensured that the students practiced reading the text without the boredom of repetition.

## **Discussion**

### **Connecting with the Local Community**

The regional university where this study was conducted has as part of its motto “serving locally.” It has a department specifically devoted to the local region, known as Regional Sciences. The ethos of serving the local community is thus keenly felt. Collaboration between institutions, generations and nationalities formed the backdrop to this project. The editors compiled the anthology at a local private university, and it was used to teach classes at the nearby national university. The stories were written by an older generation of writers, and yet read by a younger generation of readers. This project is the result of forging connections between these diverse sections of the community, in order to highlight the importance of local people’s stories.

### **Cross-cultural Mishaps go Both Ways**

This anthology is a collection of stories by both Japanese and expatriates, and thus provides a mixture of perspectives on cross-cultural encounters. It presents the notion that cross-cultural misunderstanding goes both ways; not only do Japanese speakers have mishaps speaking English, expatriates may flounder in their communication with Japanese. These examples of cross-cultural contact may help students anticipate future encounters they might have when using English.

### **Focus on Pragmatics**

Although an important focus of the lessons was reading, listening, spelling, vocabulary and collocation, the subject matter of the stories concerned pragmatic usage, that is, what is meant by what is said. The stories demonstrated language use for authentic communication. For example, Yoko Umetsu’s story highlights the important distinction between the questions “What kind of eggs

do you like?” and “How do you like your eggs?” Examples such as these highlight the fact that language choices have real-life consequences.

### **Benefits of using an Authentic Text**

The anthology is an authentic text and was not designed to be a textbook; it was created for the writers’ enjoyment. Accordingly, there are differences in the lexico-grammatical complexity of the stories, largely depending on whether they were written by Japanese speakers or expatriates. As I read the stories aloud to the students, I tried to judge whether the level was appropriate for them. Many of the stories by the expatriate writers had too much lexico-grammatical complexity to be understood without excessive decoding. I discovered that the stories written by Japanese writers were easier for them to understand, and I ended up choosing to read more of the stories written by Japanese than expatriate writers. The students may have preferred the stories written by Japanese writers because they may have found it easier to identify with their stories. Therefore, an unusual feature of this project was that many of the stories were not written by native English speaking language specialists, but by members of the local Japanese community.

### **Conclusion**

This project had three major benefits. Firstly, the editors have completed a creative-writing project in the local community. The local Japanese citizens and international residents have produced works of creative writing in English, and the local citizens have translated them into Japanese.

Secondly, the students have had the opportunity to read stories by local citizens and international residents of a different generation. They have been able to learn about cross-cultural understanding from both a Japanese perspective, and from that of international people in their community.

Thirdly, the stories in the text could be delivered as a live form of RWL to provide a supply a model of prosody to the text. Furthermore, as Ong (1982) has elegantly explained, reading aloud to a group unifies the reader and audience in a shared experience.

Some readers may wish to pursue similar projects in their communities. Soliciting stories from local citizens enables the conservation of their stories. Having them available in two languages means that they will reach a wider audience. Featuring these stories in classrooms helps the younger generation connect with the experiences of both local citizens and international members of their culture.



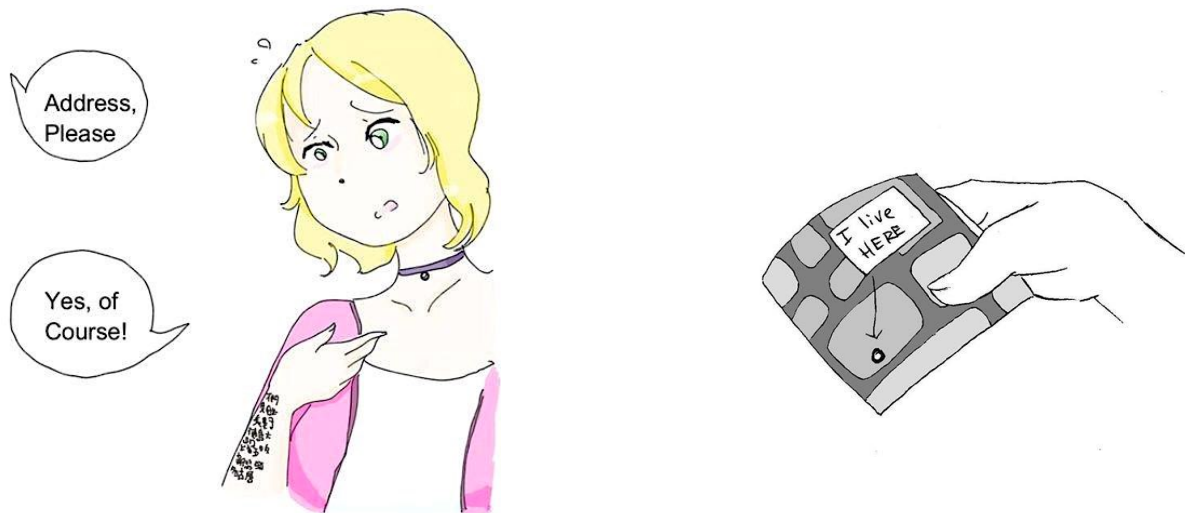
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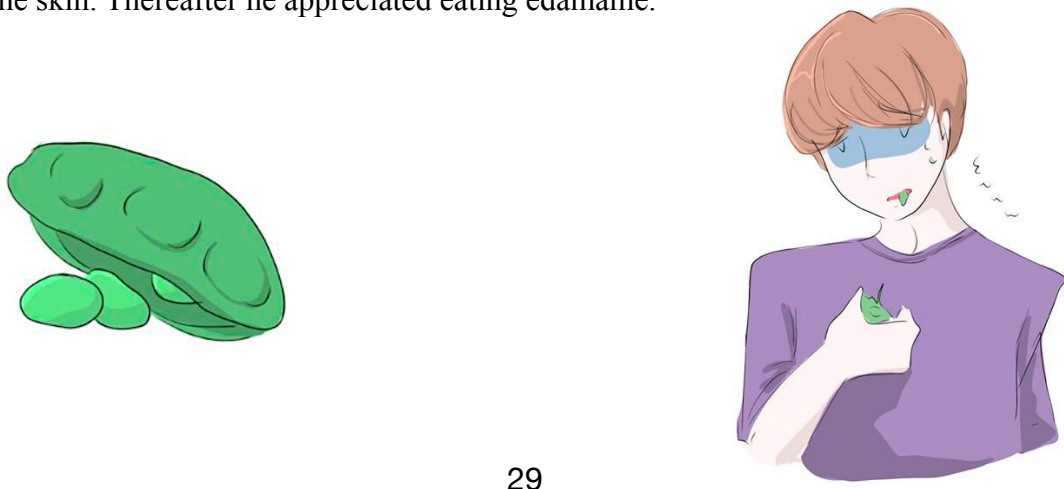
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## Appendix A: Additional Stories

“Address Unknown,” another story by Suzanne Kamata, describes the pitfalls of having a Japanese address; only the postal workers seem to be able to find her house from her address. Her grandmother refused to write to her unless she provided address labels, and even taxi drivers could not find her house. Even her child’s teacher, on the annual school-home visit, could not find her house after she had provided a detailed map.

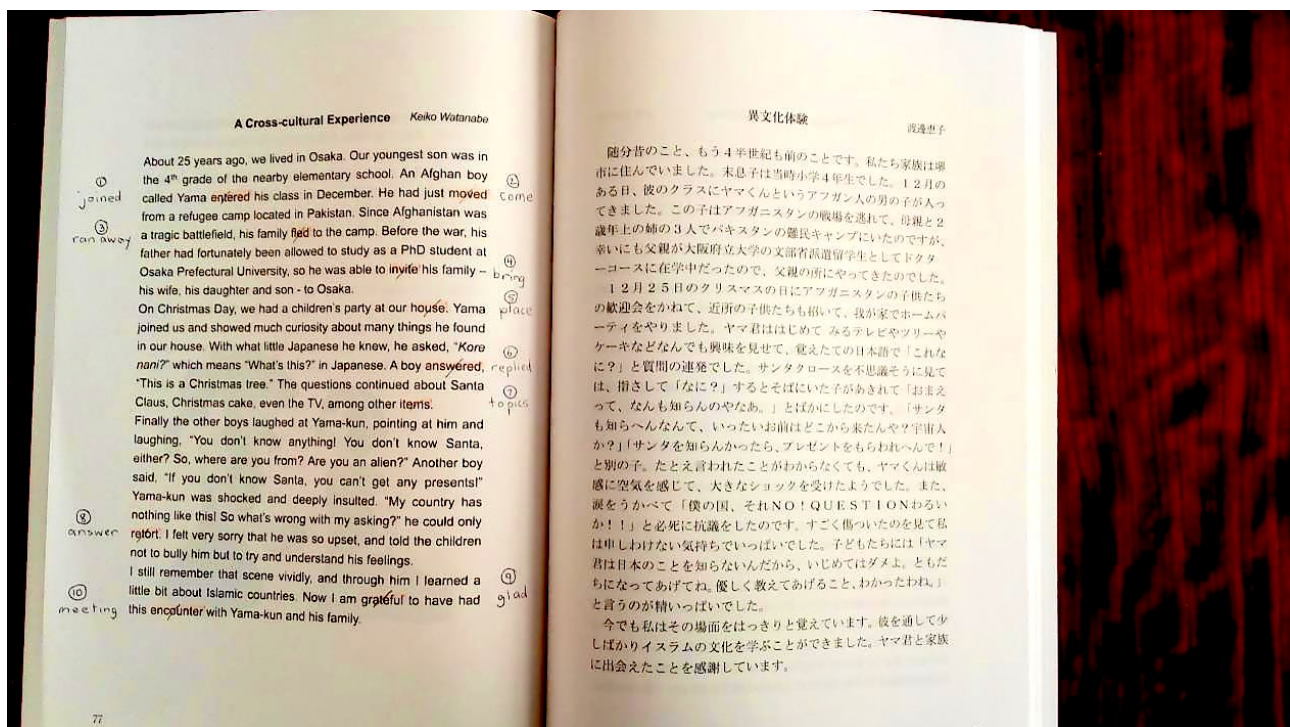


In “The Edamame Experience,” Benjamin Herdman began by recounting some of the things that he had learnt in Japan, such as the fact that Japanese people don’t often say “I love you”, or hug each other. Then he indicated that one of the most interesting things he has learnt concerns edamame (salted boiled soybeans). Convinced they were unappetizing, he only ventured to taste one, skin and all, when he was eating out alone and couldn’t be observed. His suspicions were confirmed, until one day he went out with a friend to a restaurant, and witnessed his friend eating it without the skin. Thereafter he appreciated eating edamame.



## Appendix B: Sample of Mini-test

### A Cross-cultural Experience by Keiko Watanabe



Spelling List: class, family, curiosity, finally, alien, presents, shocked, wrong, bully, vividly

Glosses:

- a very very unkind person (bully)
- in the end (finally)
- very surprised (shocked)
- lesson (class)
- mother, father, sister, brother (family)
- not right (wrong)
- from another planet (alien)
- clearly (vividly)
- strong interest (curiosity)
- gifts (presents)