

# Picture Stories in Japanese Elementary School English Classrooms

## (4) A Comparison of the Use of Picture Stories in Japan and Three English Speaking Countries

Tomoko Kaneko

### Abstract

This paper, Section 4 of the series 'Picture Stories in Japanese Elementary School English Classrooms' investigates the actual use of picture stories in classrooms, comparing 17 survey replies in Japan and a total of 21 in three English speaking countries, the US, Canada and Australia. Although the survey itself was small and English is a foreign language in Japan while it is mostly an additional language of the school-aged children in the other three countries, the results show extremely interesting insights about the use of picture stories in English classrooms, especially for younger learners in Japan.

## 1. Introduction

The new elementary school English course guide by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan has come into force since April, 2020. The guide promotes the use of picture stories in English classes so that the learners will attain a way to think independently, to make decisions appropriately and to express themselves effectively. In addition, the use of picture stories is recommended because it encourages children to learn new vocabulary, phrases and sentences and how to communicate using them.

The purpose of the present paper is to find and discuss better ways to use picture stories in newly introduced compulsory English classes in Japan by comparing the replies to the survey on how teachers use picture stories in English classes.

## 2. Survey questions

In order to grasp what is going on in elementary school English classes in Japan and overseas, survey questions were distributed to elementary school teachers in Japan and also in the US, Australia and Canada. The survey questions are shown in Appendix.

The questions regarding the use of picture stories in English classrooms were as follows.

1. Picture stories the teachers use in class. (Survey Section 3)
2. The reasons the teachers use picture stories in class. (Survey Section 4a)
3. At what point the teachers use a picture story in a lesson. (Survey Section 4b)
4. The length of the time they spend reading a picture story in class. (Survey Section 4c)
5. The teaching procedure employed using a picture story. (Survey Section 4d)
6. Follow-up activities to be recommended. (Survey Section 4e)
7. Respondents' additional comments on using picture stories. (Survey Section 4f)

### 3. Results of the survey

The respondents are elementary school teachers who teach English in the classroom mainly to speakers of other languages. Those in Japan are from various areas, those in the US are located in Boston, those in Australia are in Melbourne, and those in Canada are in Nanaimo.

Chart 1 shows the total number of replies to the survey from each country.

**Chart 1. Total number of replies to the survey**

Countries	Japan	US	Australia	Canada	Total
Number of Replies	17	10	5	6	38

Firstly in this section, the results gained from the survey will be summarized in the order of the survey questions with a brief discussion comparing results received from teachers in each country.

#### 3-1. Picture stories the teachers use in class

Some interesting comments regarding the stories used in each country will be reported and discussed in the following section.

##### (1) Japan

Eric Carl's stories are very popular. *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* was used by six teachers, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by three, and *Today is Monday* by one.

The second most popular author was Nick Sharratt. *Ketchup on Your Cornflakes?* was used by four teachers, and *Shark in the Park* was used by one teacher.

In addition, David Shannon's *No! David* was used by four teachers, and *Duck on a Bike* by one teacher.

Dr. Seuss is also popular and two teachers used *In a People House. Mr. Brown Can Moo! Can You?* was used by one teacher.

Rod Campbell's *Dear Zoo* was listed by two teachers.

Lastly, *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed* by Eileen Christelow, and *I'll Teach My Dog 100 Words* by Michael Frith were each used by one teacher.

There seems to be a tendency for the Japanese teachers' favorite book contents to be animals, mistakes children make, and daily life. In Japan, teaching English using picture stories has started quite recently and the teachers are still researching the kind of books most suitable for children to learn English and enjoy reading.

##### (2) US

Except for *Winnie the Witch* series by Valerie Thomas and Korky Paul and *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* by Judith Kerr were used by two teachers, all the other books were used only once including *Pete the Cat* series by Eric Litwin and James Dean as well as *Groovy Joe* series by

Eric Litwin and Tom Lichtenheld.

All the titles and authors listed in the US survey were different from the ones listed in Japan, except for Eric Carl. Since English is almost certainly more familiar to the American children, it can be expected that a much wider variety of picture stories are being used in classes in the US than in Japan.

(3) Australia

*Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus* by Mo Willems and *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt were used by two teachers. Mo Willems' *The Pigeon Wants a Puppy* was used by one teacher.

*Where is the Green Sheep?* by Mem Fox and Judy Horacek was used by one teacher. One teacher indicated that she uses all the books written by Mem Fox.

Eric Carl's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* was used by one teacher in Australia, while the book was used by three teachers in Japan.

(4) Canada

Mo Willems' name was listed not only on the Australian list but also on the Canadian list. The titles of the books are *Elephant and Piggy* book series.

Eric Carl's *Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* are also on the list.

Eric Carl and Mo Willems seem to be the most popular story book authors in the four countries.

### 3-2. The reasons the teachers use picture stories in class

Reasons for the use of picture stories in the classrooms can be categorized into five areas. The categories in Chart 2 were created by the researcher based on all the replies to Survey Section 4a.

**Chart 2. A comparison of the purpose of picture story use in the four countries** (Multiple answers allowed.)

Categories	Japan	US	Australia	Canada	Total
1. Psychological development	5 18.5%	4 14.3%	2 15.4%	6 27.3%	17 ( 18.9%)
2. Literacy education	3 11.1%	5 17.9%	7 52.9%	4 18.2%	19 ( 21.1%)
3. Language skills	17 63.0%	13 46.4%	2 15.4%	10 45.5%	42 ( 46.7%)
4. Interest in illustrations and language	1 3.7%	6 21.4%	2 15.4%	2 9.1%	11 ( 12.2%)
5. Cross-cultural experience	1 3.7%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 ( 1.1%)
Total	27 100.0%	28 100.0%	13 100.0%	22 100.1%	90 (100.0%)

*Note.* The numbers in Chart 2 show the total count of replies in each category, not the number of participants answering the question.

The most popular reason for using picture stories is for teaching children language skills, except in Australia, where the main purpose is for the children to acquire literacy. In the US, children’s interests in the illustrations and language received higher points compared to the other countries. It is interesting to note that in Japan, one teacher replied that the use of picture stories in class is useful because it helps children to have cross-cultural experience.

Compared to the three foreign countries, the teachers in Japan seem to have less interest in raising literacy by using picture stories.

### 3-3. At what point the teachers use picture stories in class

Chart 3 shows at what point in the lesson teachers use picture stories.

**Chart 3. The time picture stories are used in class** (Multiple answers allowed.)

Categories	Japan	US	Australia	Canada	Total
1. In the last class before the lesson as introduction	5 13.9%	1 8.3%	1 6.7%	4 19.0%	11 ( 13.4%)
2. At the beginning of a lesson	6 16.7%	7 58.3%	6 40.0%	6 28.6%	25 ( 30.5%)
3. In the middle of a lesson	8 22.2%	1 8.3%	4 4.0%	5 23.8%	18 ( 22.0%)
4. Toward the end of a lesson	9 25.0%	3 25.0%	4 26.7%	3 14.3%	19 ( 23.2%)
5. Other	8 22.2%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	1 14.3%	9 ( 11.0%)
Total	36 100.0%	12 99.9%	15 100.1%	19 100.0%	82 (100.1%)

*Note.* The numbers in the chart show the count of replies in each category, not the number of participants.

There is a difference between Japan and other countries regarding when teachers teach with picture stories. There seems to be a tendency that the picture stories are used toward the end of the lesson in Japan, but they are used at the beginning of the lesson rather than toward the end of the lesson in the other three countries. It is possible that, in Japan, the picture story reading is not the main activity in the class. The learners enjoy listening to a story for fun or to review vocabulary or phrases which have been taught in class using the main so-called textbook. The chart suggests that the teachers in the other three countries teach English language using picture stories as a sort of main textbook, while in Japan the children have separate textbooks which are organized based on the seeming difficulty in English vocabulary, expressions and grammar. It is also possible that it takes much longer for Japanese teachers to prepare their learners for reading a picture book in the classroom. Eight teachers in Japan who marked the category ‘Other’ in the survey replied “It depends,” which means that whenever they have extra time, they introduce picture stories in the class. Their replies also show that picture stories are not the main teaching material in the Japanese classrooms.

### 3-4. Time used for picture story reading

Not all the teachers replied to this question and the numbers in the chart show the actual count of replies in each category. The average time used for picture story reading in each country was calculated based on the actual count of replies. For example, in the case of Japanese survey, since two teachers replied less than 10 minutes, the total time the two teachers use for picture-story reading was counted 20 minutes at most. As for the “More than 20 minutes” reply, the author estimated that it took about 30 minutes. In the case of Japanese replies, the total time the teachers who answered “More than 20 minutes” used for story reading was calculated as two times 30 minutes which equals 60 minutes. In this way, the total time all the Japanese teachers use for picture-story reading was calculated as 20 minutes+24 minutes+95 minutes+60 minutes, which equals 199 minutes. Then the average time used for picture story reading was calculated by dividing 199 minutes by 15 teachers, which equals 13.3 minutes each. The numbers of replies in “Depends” by the teachers in the US and Canada was disregarded in the average count. Thus the total number of replies was counted as nine in the US and five in Canada when the average time used for picture story reading was calculated.

**Chart 4. Time used for picture story reading**

Categories	Japan	US	Australia	Canada	Total
Less than 10 minutes	2 13.3%	2 18.2%	3 60.0%	0 0.0%	7 (18.9%)
10-14 minutes	6 40.0%	4 36.4%	1 20.0%	3 50.0%	14 (37.8%)
15-19 minutes	5 33.3%	0 0.0%	1 20.0%	1 16.7%	7 (21.1%)
More than 20 minutes	2 13.3%	3 27.3%	0 0.0%	1 16.7%	6 (18.9%)
Depends	(0) 0.0%	(2) 18.2%	(0) 0.0%	(1) 16.7%	(3) ( 8.1%)
Total replies	15	9	5	5	34
Average time used for picture story reading	13.3 minutes	18.4 minutes	12.6 minutes	15.2 minutes	15.6 minutes

The teachers in the US spend the longest time for reading picture books among the four countries. Charts 3 and 4 may indicate that, in Japan, since the learners have an insufficient knowledge of English vocabulary, grammar and culture, they are not able to start reading a story book right at the beginning of a lesson or in a shorter time. The length of time for story reading in the four countries varies but as a whole, the appropriate time seems to be around 15 minutes.

### 3-5. Teaching Procedures

Since a variety of answers were collected for this question, I have used the Guided Reading procedure (Leeper, 2018) to summarize this section. This procedure was created for non-native

learners so that they can read by themselves. The procedure follows a small group interactive approach which puts the focus on repeated reading, thinking and interaction among the group.

As has been shown in my former study, ‘Picture Stories in Japanese Elementary School English Classrooms (3) A Comparison of the Effect of Two Types of After-Reading Activities on the Quantity and Quality of Learner Oral Outcomes’ (2019), it is extremely important for non-English speaking children to prepare what they want to say even in their native language before they provide output in English. In this sense, recommendations in my former study are in line with Guided Reading procedures.

In Guided Reading, teachers follow 10 steps:

- ① Prior Knowledge: Children’s experience concerning the theme of the story will be discussed both in the children’s native language and English.
- ② Story Introduction: Children will guess what the story will be by only seeing the front page picture of the book and the title.
- ③ Picture Walk: Just like taking a walk, children take a look at the pictures one by one and guess the story, to raise their interest in the story.
- ④ Read Aloud: Reading aloud carefully and slowly by the teacher with questions to encourage the children to think about the story follows the children reading aloud together.
- ⑤ New Vocabulary: Learning new vocabulary using various teaching techniques.
- ⑥ Choral Reading: The second time, the children read aloud paragraph by paragraph or section by section.
- ⑦ Questions and Answers (5W1H): The third time, the children read aloud together with the teacher asking questions using who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- ⑧ Story Map and Retelling: Children make their own map of the story by noting the title, setting, characters, problems, solutions, ending, and author’s message and retell the story using their own words. The “Think Aloud” method is included in this step for the purpose of this study. In “Think Aloud,” children retell the story and at the same time they put what they think into words.
- ⑨ Independent Reading: Children read the story themselves, or in a group.
- ⑩ Enrichment Program: Children use what they learned in the story in their conversation, games, projects and so on.

**Chart 5. Teaching steps based on Guided Reading Procedure**

Teaching Procedure Steps	Japan	US	Australia	Canada	Total
Prior Knowledge	14(17.8%)	2	2	2	20
Story Introduction	2	1	1	4(16.7%)	8
Picture Walk	2	3	0	2	7
Read Aloud	13(16.5%)	9(21.4%)	3(18.8%)	3	28(17.4%)
New Vocabulary	7	5	2	4(16.7%)	18

Choral Reading	13(16.5%)	2	0	0	15
Questions and Answers (5W1H)	4	6	1	2	13
Story Map and Retelling	10	5	5(31.3%)	2	22
Independent Reading	1	0	0	3	4
Enrichment	13(16.5%)	9(21.4%)	2	2	26(16.1%)
Total	79	42	16	24	161
Average Steps Per Teacher	4.6	4.2	3.2	4.0	4.2

*Note.* The numbers in the chart show the count of replies in each category, not the number of participants. The actual order of steps which teachers use in a given class also varies.

The percentages in the brackets are shown in the steps taken by more than 15% by the teachers in each country.

In Japan, the most frequently used step was “Prior Knowledge,” which 14 teachers reported. The second most frequently used steps were “Read Aloud,” “Choral Reading” and “Enrichment”. They were nominated by 13 teachers. In the US, the most frequent activities were “Read Aloud” and “Enrichment,” which were used by nine teachers respectively. In Australia, the most frequent activities were “Story Map and Retelling” and “Read Aloud,” came next. In Canada, the most frequent activities were “Story Introduction” and “New Vocabulary.”

“Read Aloud” and “Enrichment” activities were common activities often performed in the US and Japan, although in the US, children often read the picture story aloud without spending much time for “Prior Knowledge.”

It is also clear that in all countries, “Read Aloud” is an indispensable step in general.

Chart 6 is a rough summary of the order of the steps taken in the four countries. The step categories in each country have been decided by the author by picking up the five steps taken frequently. There seems to be a slight difference in the teaching procedure in each country as shown in Chart 6.

**Chart 6. Comparison of the order of teaching steps among the four countries based on the Guided Reading Procedure**

Countries	1 <sup>st</sup> Step	2 <sup>nd</sup> Step	3 <sup>rd</sup> Step	4 <sup>th</sup> Step	5 <sup>th</sup> Step
Japan	Prior Knowledge	Read Aloud	Choral Reading	Retelling	Enrichment
US	Read Aloud	New Vocabulary	Questions and Answers	Retelling	Enrichment
Australia	Prior Knowledge	Read Aloud	New Vocabulary	Retelling	Enrichment
Canada	Story Introduction	Read Aloud	New Vocabulary	Independent Reading	

As a whole, the differences in the steps in the four countries are minor. Starting from some kind of pre-activities, for example, discussing prior knowledge, trying a picture walk, or the teacher’s introduction to the story, reading aloud activity follows. New vocabulary learning

comes next, which leads to questions and answers and retelling of the story, or independent reading in order for the children to think deeply and understand the content well. The final procedure is the enrichment. Among the pre-activities, “Picture Walk” is not used so often in Japan yet. It could be an effective activity for Japanese learners even if used in the enrichment step.

Another way to compare the procedures taken in the four countries is to compare the number of steps involved in teaching with picture books. The “Average Steps Per Teacher” in Chart 5 shows the average number of steps each teacher took in class. When we compare the frequency, more steps were taken in Japan and the US than in Australia and Canada. However, there was no co-relation between the time used for teaching picture books and the procedure steps taken in class.

### 3-6. Recommended follow-up enrichment activities

Various follow-up enrichment activities recommended in the questionnaire survey are shown in Chart 7.

**Chart 7. Recommended follow-up activities**

Activities	Japan	US	Australia	Canada	Total
Dramatization	1	1	1		3
Character/setting descriptions			1		1
Poster/diorama making	1			1	2
Picture drawing	1			1	2
Show and tell	1				1
Paper puppet theater	1	1			2
Order the pictures	1	1			2
Story retelling (summarizing)	1	1	1	1	4
Story bags with story props to retell		1			1
Make your own story/poem	1	2	1	2	6
Write a continuation		2		1	3
Business card book making		1			1
Dear Diary (children choose a character)		2			2
Gender-bender (change the gender)		1			1
Billboard (create an ad.)/Collage		2			2
Making connections with your life			1	1	2
What if (if the characters were different?)		1			1
Make your own story		1			1
Mapmaker (draw a map of the setting)		1			1
Re-create the front cover		1			1
Coloring pictures		1			1
Compare & contrast with other stories		1			1
Pantomime		1			1
Fictional friends (Choose a friend from the book)		1			1



Holden meets Hamlet (talk among the characters)		1			1
Author interview		1			1
Autobiography		1			1
Webbing		1			1
Censorship defense		1			1
Drawing and writing the favorite part of the story			1	2	3
Word rhyming				1	1
Journal writing				1	1
3 facts, 2 questions, and 1 thing you can't forget				1	1
Total	8	28	6	12	54

*Note.* The numbers in the chart show the count of replies in each category, not the number of participants.

Seventeen teachers in Japan recommended eight activities in total, while 10 teachers in the US recommended 28, five teachers in Australia recommended six, and six teachers in Canada recommended 12. This means 2.8 activities per teacher in the US, 1.2 in Australia, 2.0 in Canada and 0.5 in Japan. The number of recommendations per teacher was the least frequent in Japan, while that in the US was the most frequent. This result shows that in Japan the variety of follow-up or enrichment activities is rather small compared to the other countries. However, the result could be expected, because teaching English using picture stories has just started in recent years in Japan. I would recommend that teachers in Japan adopt follow-up activities used in other countries to enable them to broaden the range of activities effective to improve children's English fluency in their own classrooms.

The most popular follow-up activity was "Make your own story," which received six votes in total, and at least one or two votes from all of the four countries. "Story retelling (summarizing)" follows with four votes in total, one vote from each country. "Dramatization," "Write a continuation," and "Drawing and writing the favorite part of the story" followed, all of which received three votes each. Since no teachers in Japan recommended "Write a continuation" and "Drawing and writing the favorite part of the story," I would recommend that these two activities are worth trying in Japan after reading picture stories. One concern about assigning writing activities to the beginning level learners in Japan is the children's productive ability. Many teachers in Japan believe that while the children are in the beginner's level, teaching should focus mostly on the primary receptive skill, listening. Whereas teachers who replied from outside Japan teach English as an additional language and their learners are in the target language environment, the children in Japan are learning English as a foreign language in the non-target language environment. Because of this, many teachers in Japan believe that while the learners are in beginners' level, it is best to just practice the primary receptive skill, listening. However, although the learning environment is crucial in any case, how to increase the learners' interest and their enthusiasm to communicate by applying what they learn seems to be also crucial in a non-English speaking country like Japan, too.

### 3-7. Respondents' additional comments on using picture stories

Lastly, I'd like to note some particularly insightful comments from the survey.

#### (1) Japan

Picture story reading by upper graders will be a good chance for lower graders to find role models in story reading. They help learners develop their imagination and creativity, and they lead the learners to focus on the content of the story not on the form of the language.

#### (2) US

It is useful to use several books on a similar theme during a week or two, to give children exposure to different genres of stories. Picture stories are a visual stimulus to promote thinking and questioning, and to consolidate and enhance understanding. It allows the children to relax and feel at ease before home time. Illustrated stories really help children who are beginning to learn English as they allow them to follow along with the class.

#### (3) Australia

Picture stories are invaluable resources that can bring a story to life and provide a thrill for reading lessons. They can be used not only in Reading & Writing, but Math, Science, History, the Arts, and other disciplines as well to develop social skills. Reading picture stories is an engaging way to encourage learners to think about different ideas and concepts in literacy. Picture stories also inspire creativity with imaginative or informative writing.

#### (4) Canada

Picture stories are great jumping off points for discussions or for introducing new concepts, themes, topics, etc. There are many different concepts, ideas and experiences that can be taught using literature such as children's story books. They are the best way to engage learners to hear the rhythm of English and re-reading favorite stories is also important, fun and encouraged.

It is clear that picture stories can be used for many purposes in many different learning programs. The learners can enjoy a story and activities based on what they read through the story, which can provide an ideal setting for learning an additional or foreign language. In all countries, the teachers who replied to the survey are happy with the learners' development of their imagination, creativity, thinking and understanding through picture story reading. One reason for that can be the fact that picture stories lead learners to focus on the content of the story, rather than solely on the form of the language. By using story books, learners can experience the thrill of reading. Because picture stories can be used in many other disciplines than language learning, for example, Math, Science, History, the Arts, and so on, they are useful resources for learners to develop social skills and to broaden their horizons.

#### 4. Summary

Although Eric Carl's picture stories are listed by all of the four countries, Mo Willems' is not listed in the US and Japan. This phenomenon suggests that the selection of story books used in Japan or maybe those sold in the Japanese market is highly influenced by the US. Good advice regarding the choice of picture stories for English classes found in this survey is that it is preferable to re-examine the choice of books from a broader perspective. By looking for the picture stories used outside Japan or the US, it will be possible to select more suitable books for Japanese children, where not only language but also other insights can be provided to the Japanese learners.

The above suggestion is also based on the survey replies to the question on the purpose of using story books in classes. It is true that, in Japan, the use of story books in English teaching is originally pursued for the purpose of teaching English. However, since the use of picture stories in class also has a chance to be effective on raising children's literacy and personality development as well as interests on illustrations and languages, it is recommended that teachers in Japan pick up a variety of picture stories to be used in classrooms. In this sense, story selections should take place in a wide spectrum of countries and areas in the world.

There are some differences in the part of the class time taken for picture story reading and the length of time used for the activity in Japan compared to the way in the other three countries. Japanese teachers spare the lesson time for picture story reading toward the end of the class if only they had extra time to do so for longer minutes than teachers in the other countries. Considering the fact that the course guide by MEXT, which is effective from the 2020 school year, guides exactly what to teach in English classes in Japan, it is natural that very short stories will be introduced at the end of each lesson as a summary of that lesson in the authorized textbooks. In this situation, it is highly recommended to the teachers in Japan to have extra time to read story books outside the class, for example, during lunch time or the morning and after school assembly time, in order for the children to have a chance to listen to stories in English for enjoyment. In that way, the learners will surely have good chances to increase their interests in reading books.

As has been shown in Chart 6, teaching procedures among the four countries are roughly the same. One great idea gained from the other countries is "Picture Walk." It will surely develop the learners' creative thinking. In Japan, the activity can also be included for the purpose of "Enrichment."

As a whole, the use of picture stories in classrooms is highly supported by the teachers in the four countries, although their purposes in using them are not exactly the same. It is hoped that in the near future, children in Japan will enjoy reading English picture stories just like they enjoy those written in Japanese. The teachers' and parents' advice on English picture story reading not only to learn English but also for genuine enjoyment is highly recommended in the development of English education in Japan.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire on Activities for Teaching English to Children

**Section 1.** About yourself (Please circle an applicable answer.)

Age: under 20 21~30 31~40 41~50 over 51

Teaching experience:

less than 5 years 5~10 years 11~15 years 16~20 years over 20 years

Use of picture-stories in class:

always about once a month about once every 2 weeks about once a week less

**Section 2.** About your pupils

Average age: \_\_\_\_\_ years old

Native languages: \_\_\_\_\_

English fluency (please circle): native very fluent fluent understandable broken

Section 3. List the name and author's name of 3 picture storybooks you use in class

Name	Author

Section 4. Please write brief answers to the following questions about the use of picture storybooks in English classes.

a. Why do you use picture stories in class?

b. When do you use a picture story? Circle the appropriate answer/answers

① in the last class before the lesson as introduction
② at the beginning of a lesson
③ in the middle of a lesson
④ toward the end of a lesson
⑤ other (please specify): _____

c. How much time do you like to spend using picture stories in one lesson?

d. Please write a brief teaching procedure for picture-story reading.

What you do (the teacher)	What the children do

e. Please describe follow-up story-reading activities you can recommend to other teachers.

f. Other comments or opinions about using picture stories in English classes

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