

# A Story-Telling and Re-Telling Activity

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## Introduction

At one time or another many teachers have watched their schedules of lesson stages crumble in the face of that excruciatingly drawn-out process of decision making by Japanese students. In setting up this story making activity using photographs as raw material, I had two main aims. The first was to inject a degree of randomness into the selection of pictures intended as stimuli, thus cutting down the amount of time students could take over what really ought to be a minor aspect of the whole task. The second was to force students to actually listen attentively to the stories which their classmates were telling them. The activity outlined below has achieved both aims with a wide range of ability levels.

## Procedure

Lay out on a table, either face up or face down, a good range of 'people' and 'setting' photographs from magazines, catalogues etc. Put students into groups of three or four and where possible arrange the room so that these groups are spaced well apart and not too close to the laid-out pictures.

If the pictures are face up, have one student from each group come out and select one. S(he) then rejoins the group but keeps the chosen picture face down. The other students in the group do likewise, and only when each member has made a selection may the pictures be turned over. If the pictures were laid out face down, then either students each choose one without looking or one member from each group is asked to pick up three or four. Back in the group, the pictures are turned over and students attempt to integrate them into a common story line.

It often happens that one or more pictures cannot easily be related to the others, so, after a little thinking time, the group may be allowed to select a few more pictures to pad out their initial ideas for a story line. A useful wrinkle here is to require that one picture be handed back for each new picture taken. This helps prevent excessively long and complex stories.

Story creation proceeds. Group members can be encouraged to make very short notes, or a flowchart or spider graph style diagram to help them keep the story in mind. Manuscript writing should be strongly discouraged, especially if only one member of the group is doing it.

When groups have come up with a story, the members of each group play *jan-ken-pon* (Rock, Scissors, Paper Game), probably Japan's fastest decision making procedure. The loser has to stay behind and tell the group's story to two or more listeners from another group, while the other group members move to the next group to hear that group's story. Remind the storyteller to arrange the pictures in story sequence so that the listeners can see them clearly, and stress that listeners will have to pay close attention to the story they are about to hear, asking questions if anything is unclear, since one of them is going to have to tell it again her/himself.

After the two 'new' listeners have heard the story and asked any questions they want to, they also play *jan-ken-pon*. The loser again stays behind to tell the story, while the previous storyteller and the other listener(s) move to the next group. The story is told again. Even if a chart or diagram has been left behind, minor-to-drastic alterations may occur to stories in the re-telling, but this can add to the fun. If you do overhear serious revisions, you might have students contrast the versions they heard at the end of the activity.

On the next or next-but-one change-of-role, only one person in each original group has not yet taken on the role of teller of one story or another. In the interests of fairness, then, the *jan-ken-pon* can be omitted. If further rounds of re-telling are needed, *jan-ken-pon* is a fair way of choosing a storyteller.

## Follow-up

Asking Japanese students to critique their classmates' stories, can be rather a non-starter, especially as individual stories may have mutated from one telling to the next. You might, however, ask students to rank the stories they heard in terms of plausibility, imagination, complexity etc. Where one story is a clear favourite, students may enjoy acting it out, which of course requires the narrative to be turned into dialogue. Outside of Hollywood, this may not be the most essential of language skills, but it almost invariably throws up plenty of good teaching points and student questions.

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