Ghostly Voices: A Critical Approach to Narratives of Folklore and Ghost Stories in the Language Learning Classroom

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Myth is the hidden part of every story, the buried part,
the region that is unexplored because there are as yet
no words to enable us to get there.

— Italo Calvino, *The Uses of Literature*

Introduction

Providing learners of English (or, indeed, any other language) with meaningful, engaging and stimulating discussion topics can be a daunting task. For one, selection of task themes that are cross-culturally relevant and that can be applied to language acquisition activities with little or no knowledge of the range and diversity of learner backgrounds (or interests) can be problematic, potentially alienating students from the learning experience. As researchers, as well as teachers, we strive to enthuse our students through the integration of our own research into the language classroom — a task frequently made complicated by the nature of language learning itself and, no less, the diversity of student interests, which in the case of the Fluency-oriented Workshop (FLOW) is extraordinarily wide-ranging due to the mixing of learners from across the humanities and sciences. FLOW is a compulsory seven-week course for all first-year students at the University of Tokyo, complimenting the skills taught in mandatory English language writing and comprehension courses by instructing students in the formal presentation of academic arguments in English.

FLOW classes promote critical reflection on English fluency and language development within an academic context and are

taught to students of mixed academic pathways, organized according to English proficiency rather than subject field. As such, one is faced with the task of mobilizing those two key phrases derived from post-millennial pedagogical practice: inclusivity and differentiation (Alexiadou and Essex, 2015; Corbett, 2001; Florian and Linklater, 2010; Topping and Maloney, 2005). Of course, as teachers, we naturally attempt to include all students taking our classes, to engage them in prescribed activities whilst catering to their individual learning needs where possible. In the case of discussion classes, however, opting for an inappropriate theme can isolate and demotivate learners, causing them to divest from learning activities and any subsequent language development. It is therefore paramount to target the student audience with thematics broad enough to include all but where the content can be used for specific purposes and tailored to the interest of individuals.

As an accessible and interdisciplinary area of study, folklore is well placed in both the exercise of a second language and development of critical thinking skills for high-proficiency learners. Indeed, folklore might well be considered as a language-based discipline, making use of narrative and oral history through which to analyse the cultural praxis of self-defining (folk) communities. The use of folklore and its associated literature (for example, fairy tales, myths, legends) in education has already been well documented, with a number of scholars looking to analyse its uses in the teaching of discourse politics (Shuldiner, 1998), language acquisition (Lwin 2009a, 2009b; Prastiwi, 2015) and critical thinking (Untiedt, 2005; Wolf-Knuts and Kaivola-Bregenhøj, 2001). Furthermore, this growing trend in highlighting the value of folklore for teachers and students has been coupled with a wider uptake of folkloric and ghostloric case studies within the humanities and social sciences, a development Roger Luckhurst termed 'the spectral turn' (2001) due to the significant rise in academic publications on these subjects. Certainly Luckhurst's claim of a 'turn' was timely, if not presentimental, with writings on folklore and cognate subject areas becoming ubiquitous within social scientific studies. Examples of such works can be found spanning the academic strata: archaeology and folklore (Gazin-Scwartz and Holtorf, 1999; Thurgill, 2015a); sociology of haunting (Davies, 2009; Gordon, 2008; Lip-

man, 2014); phantasmagoria (Hetherington, 2001; Pile, 2005a, 2005b); supernatural agency (Dixon, 2007; Holloway, 2006, 2016); literary hauntings (Magner, 2015; Matless, 2006; Wylie, 2008); alternative spiritual practices (Mackian, 2011, 2012); magic (Bonnett, 2017; Thurgill, 2015b) and occult tourism (Holloway, 2010; Inglis and Holmes, 2003). The breadth and diversity of works on the subject, and particularly the extent to which such writings appear outside of Folklore Studies proper, demonstrates the relevance of folklore to contemporary academic study and goes some way to reiterating the accessibility of the subject for students following various academic trajectories.

What is offered in the pages that follow is an examination of the use of cross-cultural comparisons of folklore and ghost stories as a method for developing fluency and stimulating critical thinking in classes for high-proficiency learners of English taking the FLOW course in their first year of study at the University of Tokyo, but which could, of course, be applied elsewhere. The purpose of placing the focus on critical thinking in addition to language education is to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between the two, but also to address the criticism made by Western academics that critical thinking has been given insufficient attention in Asian countries (Davies and Barnett, 2015: 01). The nature of content-based learning, even within a language class, necessitates a critical engagement from students. The position taken here is that by working with folklore and ghost stories, students learn to access English language as a means of examining narratives that construct cultural identity (their own and that of others) and gain a critical working knowledge of the importance of storytelling. By working with folkloric narratives students build confidence in their spoken English, as well as gaining the core skills required for self-reflection, critical engagement with local, national and international landscapes and cultures, and the critical analysis of belief and belonging. Through a description of the theoretical and practical underpinnings of folklore in the FLOW class, and a breakdown of classroom activities, this paper aims to position folklore as an invaluable critical framework for the development of both fluency and confidence in academic English language classes.

The latter part of this paper will describe a FLOW class delivered to an approximate total of one hundred and fifty first-

year students at the University of Tokyo, which formed part of a seven-week fluency class for high-proficiency leaners of English taught between September 2016 and July 2017. The class, themed 'Otogibanashi: Yūrei, Yōkai and Urban Legends', took place in Week 5 of a seven-class fluency course and was straddled by learner-led presentations and critical reflections on Shinto and Buddhism in weeks 4 and 6 respectively. The placement of the class allowed students to shift their focus from the group discussion, critical analysis and language activities based around the themes of aesthetics held earlier in the term toward an enquiry into landscape, national identity and belonging. The purpose of running the FLOW course in such a manner was to expose students to reflection topics that would challenge pre-existing assumptions, both of their own and foreign cultures, serving as a fertile ground for discussion and critical thinking to take place.

Whilst students appeared to make a conscious effort to engage in all classes across the course, the session based on folklore can be deemed as the most successful in motivating students to openly discuss their opinions, engage in academic debate and make use of formal argumentation (what I will describe later as the *Point, Evidence, Reflection* (PER) model). The lesson has been delivered across ten individual groups of students at the University of Tokyo. In each case students were required to undertake a number of language building and critical thinking exercises, ranging from storytelling and narrative creation to actively describing the landscape(s) of Japanese and other folktales and legends. In doing so, students entered into creative and thought-provoking dialogue, enabling them to test and question the limitations of 'evidence' in argumentation and to put into process effective problem-solving skills.

The FLOW course itself aims to develop student confidence in using spoken English, improve fluency, to offer an opinion on a considered topic and to engage in argumentation using a formal academic style. Students are streamed prior to taking the course through a self-determined proficiency test whereby they identify their level of spoken English through self-comparison to audio clips of other non-native speakers of English and peer conversation activities. Students place themselves in pre-existing fluency levels of 1–6, with 1 being least proficient and 6 at native/near-native level. The class described here refers to stu-

dents at the 'higher' end of English proficiency, namely levels 4, 5 and 6. Level 5 and 6 learners display little variation in proficiency, with students from both groupings capable of working to a near-native level of fluency. Level 4 students, whilst certainly not within the fluency range of their peers in the upper two tiers, were more than adequately equipped to use English as a language for discussion and analysis of complex issues. Moreover, the nature of the topics selected for discussion proved inclusive so as to allow for all students to share an opinion and research ahead of classes in order to strengthen their argumentation using evidence.

The recipient learners can primarily be characterized as a largely homogenous group of male students whose first language is Japanese. The percentage of female students in the classroom was roughly twenty percent overall. The majority of students in the highest proficiency FLOW classes (Level 6) were returnees or learners schooled in an international environment. Less than ten percent of the students taught in the class identified as non-native speakers of Japanese. These students drew heavily on the belief systems of their own culture, further developing comparative analysis in group and class discussions. The gender bias of the cohort was actively addressed through the formation of prompt questions around the nature and history of Japanese *yūrei* and Western ghosts, for example: '*Why are so many of Japan's ghosts women?*'. A small consideration, perhaps, but one that encouraged female students to take a more dominant role within classroom discussion, and one that offered an opportunity to challenge the historical and contemporary position of women in Japanese society. Students originating from countries other than Japan were predominately relocating from China and Korea. Again, diversity in learner backgrounds aided the development of critical discussion and comparative study of beliefs in countries neighboring Japan and allowed for the similarities and differences in folk belief to be analysed within groups.

Lore, Literature and Language

The history of folklore is, as one might imagine, far older than the use of the term itself, with the word not entering the English language until 1846 having been coined by the writer William J.

Thoms (Dundes, 1980). From the latter half of the nineteenth century folklore gained popularity as an area of academic study, reflecting the growing 'currents of romanticism and nationalism' (*ibid*: 01) that formed part of a wider cultural turn towards nostalgia, belonging and anti-modernism in Europe at the time. In his seminal survey of the origins and analysis of folklore, *Interpreting Folklore* (1980), Andrew Dundes posits nineteenth century conceptions of folklore as contingent on two readings of *folk* peoples: firstly, that the term *folk* itself was determined by a dependency on and opposition to mainstream culture, and secondly, that the former was positioned as secondary or inferior to the latter. In this sense, the study of folklore was the study of the vulgar cultural production(s) of the 'uncivilized element of a civilized society' (*ibid*: 02). However, Dundes himself attempted to modernize the term, steering away from the traditional hierarchical social structuring of folklore toward a more nuanced, egalitarian approach, focusing on characterizing *folk* as close homogenous groups with a sense of shared communal traditions, a viewpoint not too dissimilar to the 'imagined communities' later described by Benedict Anderson (1983):

> The term 'folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is — it could be a common occupation, language, or religion — but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity.
>
> (Dundes, 1965: 02)

The stark contrast between the early classist conceptions of folk production and the more socially inclusive understanding present in Dundes' study sets up an interesting space of enquiry for language students learning to think critically. Nineteenth century examinations of folklore suggested a strong correlation between *folk*, the rural and a supposed cultural inferiority —

compared to the later emphasis on group cohesion, the structure and development of tradition prevalent in modern understandings of the term not only serves to highlight the importance of etymological developments in English language, but tells students rather more about the conceptual shifts that occur in people's thinking about social and cultural spaces (urban/rural), attachments to place and landscape (native/foreign) and social and economic divisions (elite/common). Each of these tropes is worthy of student enquiry and each has a direct relevance to the understanding of folklore and its importance to both historical and contemporary cross-cultural analysis. Furthermore, as Dundes goes on to note, an emphasis on collective identity and shared practices provides learners with a more heterogeneous landscape in which to explore folklore itself:

> With this flexible definition of folk, a group could be as large as a nation or as small as a family. One can speak of American folklore or Mexican folklore or Japanese folklore in the sense that there are items of folklore shared by all or nearly all members of the group in question.
>
> (Dundes, 1965: 07)

However, Dundes' classification, whilst it allows for a multiplicity of *folk* and folk cultures to exist, fails to operate within a framework that students might easily interpret. In this sense, the setting up of an analytic model based on *folk* as a term capable of describing groups consisting of as few as two individuals can be misleading for learners. Indeed, in his essay 'Exploring Urban and Ethnic Folklore: Strategies in Research and Practice' (2001), Timothy Tangherlini criticizes Dundes' definition for its lack of clarity (for students) and works to widen the understanding of homogeneity required to grasp what common traditions must hold for the defining of *folk* in the classroom. Tangherlini writes that his learners, though quick to define 'close homogenous groups', were unable to articulate how a group of two individuals could develop the necessary customs and traditions required in the production of folk knowledge or *lore*. To this end, he offers an alternative definition of *folk*, one that positions folk groups as 'self-defining' and who 'share certain expressions which reinforce the group members' sense of belonging' (*ibid*: 28). These

'expressions' are what constitute the basis for folklore to develop and so became the object of study for Tangherlini's students.

Folklore defined (for the language learning classroom)

Defining folklore, then, can be a complex task, for scholars as well as students, with multiple definitions presented in the many anthropological and sociological writings on the subject. A key step in the integration of folklore and its associated literature into the language learning classroom is for students to process what exactly the term aims to describe. Following Tangherlini's conjecture that folklore is derived from the 'expressions' shared within certain closed groups provides a starting point, and one which allows learners to identify the nature of shared expressions present amongst their class, peer group, community and so on. That folklore and ghost stories often align themselves with some sort of moral teaching or life lesson supports the notion that these 'shared expressions' serve an educational purpose. Furthermore, that such 'teachings' exist primarily as oral historical records, as stories, informs students that the educational goals of folklore are directed at and maintained within the confines of specific communities.

Likewise, Abernethy (1997) begins his discussion of folklore and pedagogy by offering a definition for teachers that sums up the nature of the term in the broadest sense: 'Folklore is the traditional knowledge of a culture' (p. 04). This definition is broken down into five further components: *oral, traditional, variable, anonymous and formularized*. Abernethy posits that this 'traditional knowledge of a culture' is reflected firstly in its mode of transmission (by word of mouth); secondly, that it is passed on between generations in a set or customary form, a routine of sorts (the use of specific days for specific festivals etc.); thirdly, that the knowledge transmitted is continually changed by those who use it; fourthly, that authorship or the origins of the knowledge are unidentifiable; and finally, that the (folkloric) narratives are recited, forming linguistic patterns, stereotypes and clichés. On the third assertion, folklore remains relevant as a conduit for language learning and critical thinking precisely because it adapts to and is molded by the people who utilize it. As such, many students in my class(es) offer variations on the same folk-

tale or ghost story and both enjoy and benefit from discussing the possible reasons for these differences (regional variations in dialect, historical manipulation of the story during transmission, common socio-cultural anxieties, mobility of regional belief and so on). The fifth claim made by Abernethy is also worthy of note, especially when considering the use of folklore for language learning. As I will go on to describe, the use of narrative as a point for the teaching and analysis of language (and cultural praxis) is useful in FLOW classes due to the natural inclination of humans to tell and listen to stories (Armstrong, 2005), but also because of the identifiable patterns in the way such stories are told. Detecting similarities in the ways in which folktales and ghost stories are narrated supports students in their understanding of both language patterns and narrative forms.

Defining folklore for and with students allows for an interesting entry point into English language practice. As an 'ongoing process' (Roach, 1997: 34) rather than a historically 'static' subject, folklores transform with the communities who make use of them, as well as adapting to the changing environments in which they are being transmitted. Students might well observe how historical traditions, such as leaving small mounds of salt outside one's door when attending a funeral so as to deter wandering spirits, or avoiding the cutting of one's finger or toe nails at night, retain a place within modern urban communities in Japan. Furthermore, it is possible for students to consider and verbally reflect on which parts of their culture are folk-ish, culturally specific or idiosyncratic within their own communities.

Tangherlini (2001) further demonstrates the refocusing of modern folklorists on the multicultural urban environment, himself considering classroom examination of the subject as invaluable in making 'efforts to eradicate cultural misunderstanding, ethnocentrism and racism' (p. 45). If language learners are to critically engage with the uses and spaces of folklore, then doing so must be accompanied by a pedagogical framework that reflects the diversity and value of the other cultures and people from which it emerges. It is from such a perspective that David Shuldiner (1998) writes on the uses of folklore for motivating students to consider, introspectively, the roles storytelling and tradition-building play in the formation of their own ethnicity and cultural praxis. Shuldiner focuses on the oratory nature of

folktales and the people who form and preserve them. This is more than a mere exercise in 'validating identities' within the classroom (*ibid*: 193), but rather, folklore, writes Shuldiner, provides 'an effective teaching tool that draws upon familiar expressive forms to reach students' (*ibid*: 194).

Whilst students are often well acquainted with creative works and indeed some of the academic skills required in their analysis, few learners have taken part in the analysis of folklore, and even less have positioned it as a subject worthy of contemplation in the language learning classroom. Folklore and ghost stories serve as a novelty, a thematic that may, as with the subjects of their tales, present themselves at once both familiar and extraordinary. The peculiar nature of the narratives disseminated in the telling of strange tales, (both locally and (inter) nationally) offers learners an insight into the importance of cultural transmission and the layering of stories and storytelling from a cross-cultural perspective.

As evident in the myriad definitions listed here, and that are by no means exhaustive, folklore is itself a rather nebulous term, but one can locate a sense of universality in the themes presented in the many variants of folkloric literary traditions; moral teachings, cautionary tales and regional customary didactic(s). Folktales belong to the wider cultural phenomena of folk literature, which includes the ghost story, and is perhaps best considered as an oral historical tradition, one whereby the encoding of cultural messages occurred prior to the development of written language (Lwin, 2015). The more familiar folk literature with which students may have worked includes fables (i.e. moral tales, often with animals positioned as central characters), fairy tales (stories utilizing some magical elements but embedded in a plausible fictional reality) and myths (sacred or spiritually significant narratives) (Taylor, 2000). Taylor (1997) asserts there to be six core analytic skills necessary for learners of English language to acquire in order to successfully function within the academic environment; *comparing and contrasting, evaluating, presentation, supporting, organizing/grouping* and *inferencing* (p. 03). Each of these core skills, Taylor posits, can be distilled from folklore analytics due to the accessibility of its narratives:

> [T]he literary and extra-literary characteristics of folktales

> make them relatively easy to grasp. Because of this, they are ideal for introducing new skills and strategies; since less energy is required for decoding the text, more energy is available for focusing on the academic skills.
>
> (*ibid*: 03)

Folklore proffers students an opportunity to explore language, and the role it plays in the production of the social, through a scaffolding and enframing of morality, ideology and cultural discourse as narrative. Learners are charged with multiple language-based tasks in order to work with folkloric subjects: [1] reading and interpreting the text. The first point of learning takes place via locating and understanding meaning within the story. Students must read and comprehend the language of narrative, familiarizing themselves with the plot, characters and description before any form of analysis can take place; [2] once read, learners need to decode the 'lessons' embedded within the folktale, assessing what is being taught, either directly or inferred, why it is being taught and to whom the teaching is directed; [3] students can then begin to compare and contrast the tale to similar stories from their own or another country. In doing so the overarching 'sameness' of social and cultural norms and conventions can be exposed, links that relate one culture to another can be deciphered and utilized as stimuli for class discussion; [4] closer analysis of the folk narrative is used to extrapolate specific functions of language, students comment in detail on lexical choice, character roles, spatial descriptions, historical legitimacy and so on; [5] learners are able to use the folktale to mobilize wider debate on belief and belonging, analyzing the importance of (folk or ghostly) narrative in the formation of local, regional and national geographic identity in addition to the spiritual frameworks that exist within specific communities.

Narrative

The spatial *forms* of folklore, i.e. the places, spaces and landscapes that are described within folkloric tales, myths and legends are implicit to the understanding of the stories themselves. That narratives work to describe and explore places as much as people requires little coercion in its following, yet activities

based on the deconstruction of narrative and analysis of the places it purports to account for can bring about radical changes to the thinking of students, not least in the subsequent manner in which they attempt to narrate their own stories. Narrative exists as a 'complex network of relations' (Cobley, 2001: 02), one that offers students a rich linguistic and topological tapestry that demands to be unpicked, delineated and interpreted in order to make sense of both the tale and the reasons as to why it is told as it is. Furthermore, folktales in particular 'make strategic use of narrative insofar as they seek to explore and recount events, encounters and practices that are rooted in memory, people(s) and landscape' (Thurgill, 2018).

As part of the wider body of folk literature, and which folklore itself belongs to, fairy tales are possibly the first experience of narrative our learners encounter. Children's fairytales are, as Zipes (2006) comments, 'universal, ageless, therapeutic, miraculous and beautiful' (p. 01). The origins of native language learning might, then, be viewed as rooted within folk literature and therefore the subject remains of value in the acquisition of a second language. The importance of focusing on narrative as a specific teaching point for English is that its (de)construction and analysis enables students to develop a framework through which they can tell their own stories. A framework that demonstrates, both verbally and as written text, the necessity of structure and rhetorical devices in narrating with clarity and delivering information in a linear fashion.

The mythological or fantasy elements of folklore and ghost stories are no less important to the language learner than the cultural examination that can be conducted through their analysis. Rather, thinking outside of regulation and order, that is, to work imaginatively, allows students to consider the legitimacy of those narratives that have been imposed upon them — by parents, peers, teachers, institutions, politicians and so on. As Zipes notes in his analysis of the fairy tale, storytelling and narration are far more important than just describing the world around us, they are symbolic acts:

> [W]e write our own texts to gain a sense not simply of what has happened in reality but also of what has happened on psychological, economic, cultural, and other levels to free

> ourselves of the dictates of other sociohistorical texts that have prescribed and ordered our thinking and need to be disordered if we are to perceive for ourselves the processes that produce social structures, modes of production, and cultural artefacts.
>
> (2006: 02)

Such a definition is also helpful in understanding the uses of the folktale or ghost story for students of critical thinking because it immediately sets up the recording of the tale or legend as 'part of a social process, as a kind of intervention in a continuous discourse, debate, and conflict about power and social relations' (*ibid*: 02). That folkloric and ghostly narratives are intimately bound up with a *real world analysis* is by no means a modern consideration. To the contrary, such ideas were propagated in the spiritual doctrines of folklorist, occultist and author Helena Blavatsky, from whose work on the development of mythology and ancient knowledge can be derived a keen insight into the element of reality present within myth and recorded in oral tradition:

> For a myth, in Greek μῦθος, means oral tradition, passed from mouth to mouth from one generation to the other; and even in the modern etymology the term stands for a *fabulous* statement conveying some important truth; a tale of some extraordinary personage whose biography has become overgrown, owing to the veneration of successive generations, with rich popular fancy, but which is no *wholesale* fable.
>
> (Blavatsky, 1888: 425)

That oral tradition is integral to the preservation of folklore and that it 'remains a vital, often primary, mode of expression' (Shuldiner, 1998: 194), ensures its place of value within the language learning classroom. Practically speaking, then, students must engage with the classroom recitation of these narratives in order to analyse, interpret and discuss them amongst their classmates. The ubiquity of these tales, in addition to their accessibility, thus allows for language practice and the necessary critical reflection required in deconstructing the teachings of folktales, as

well as the wider cultural lessons that are enveloped within them.

Structure: Learning, Critique and the Democratic Classroom

The acquisition of a second language occurs as a multiplicity. A series of learning processes take place simultaneously, allowing for a triangulation between exposure to vocabulary and form, content reception and finally cognition before reflection and utilization are achieved. The FLOW classes described here are structured so as to engender this process. Firstly, students are exposed to English language, this takes place throughout the FLOW class as all sessions are conducted in English, but is also initiated before the class takes place through homework activities. In the case of this particular session on folklore, students are required to source a local folktale or urban legend in English, or to translate a tale from Japanese to English in order to record a two-minute reflection video ahead of class. This activity allows students to consider the subject in English prior to any formal discussion having taken place. Furthermore, video assessment allows the learner a chance to interpret and reflect on their chosen example in English in preparation for the description and analysis exercises set for the coming in-class activities. As such, a reiteration of the learning processes utilized in class underpins student development throughout the course. In addition to preparatory work, students are required to evaluate and reflect on the development of discussions in class as well as critiquing their own personal performance as homework assignments subsequent to the class having taken place. The model for learning used here (Fig. 1) is therefore indicative of the strategy employed and repeated on a weekly basis. Learners are able to familiarize themselves with the model and use it to structure their own extracurricular learning of English.

The selected teaching strategy is premised upon an active-learning approach, what we might otherwise regard as student-centered or problem-posing education. To be sure, all students wish to feel valued, both as individuals and in terms of their academic opinions. Where traditional or 'banking' education reproaches the idea that students desire to learn certain subjects

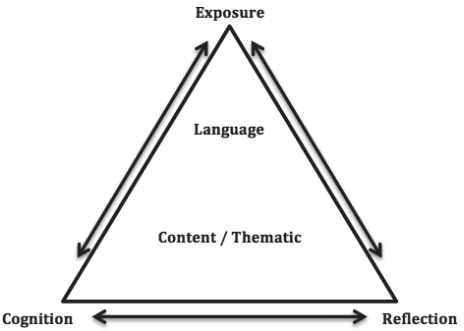

Figure 1. Triangulation of learning process articulated as cognition model.

and subject areas, problem-posing education requires a far less dogmatic approach to learning. Moreover, student-centered approaches should be noted as promoting educational diplomacy, heightening the exchange of polemical debate and dialogism. The strategy requires what has historically been regarded as a radical form of pedagogy, whereby students are empowered in their education, where they may use it to explore the reality of the world they inhabit. This is true of all subjects, of course, not language learning alone. In this scenario the learner can choose the direction that their learning takes but, more to the point, they can see the value in education as a tool for understanding, improving performance both within and outside of the classroom. Inevitably, such a pedagogy calls for the rethinking of the traditional 'authoritarian' teacher-student paradigm and reacts to the criticism that students view the 'teacher's authority as capricious and arbitrary' (Dimitriadis and Kamberelis, 2006: 33).

The democratic approach of active-learning or problem-posing education brings about a necessary change in the relationship between teacher and student, one that promotes learning at an individual level. Democracy and diplomacy, through the empowerment of the learner, require the teacher to be seen as more of a learned equal than she/he would likely have been during a student's high school education. In addition to the breakdown of this dichotomous relationship there is almost certainly a change in the attitude of the learner, who now feels that she or he has the power to speak, to question and to challenge what they are taught. In this sense, the learner has become

included in their education and taken charge of it. The power has been redistributed and dispersed so that all members of the class, including the lecturer, may speak their mind in a creative, encouraging and stimulating environment. This approach, in addition to the subject matter of the course, I believe, has enabled students of my FLOW class to work against their natural inclination to remain silent observers and instead strive for active participation.

Process: (De)constructing the FLOW Class

In the final section of this paper I will demonstrate how folklore has been practically integrated within the FLOW classroom setting, highlighting techniques and active-learning exercises that have been developed to encourage student engagement and promote the (critical) acquisition of English language. The class described below has been structured so as to allow for maximum student engagement. Apropos of the organization of a student-centered approach (described above), the following section breaks down in detail the activities of the class for the fluency session themed 'Otogibanashi: Yūrei, Yōkai and Urban Legends'.

1. Peer-led introductory activity

As with other freshman language classes at the University of Tokyo, the mandatory nature of FLOW demands students attend classes regardless of their desire to do so. I do not mean to suggest here that students are unwilling to engage or that they resent attendance, rather that it is important to be aware of the conditions under which students take classes in order to develop the necessary strategies for motivation and effective learning. Taking a democratic approach to the classroom environment, active-learning is further promoted by the inclusion of a student-defined peer-led activity as a way of transitioning to English language within the classroom and maximizing the participation of students. To this end, students nominate themselves to work in small groups, pairs or individually and to conduct a self-selected learning task during the first fifteen minutes of FLOW class. Naturally, activities vary amongst student cohorts with each semester; however, the majority of students opt for setting their classmates short micro-debate exercises. Topics of discussion

have included: the ethical and moral dilemmas surrounding artificial intelligence (AI), the development of a Japanese feminist manifesto, and the cultural politics of anime. An exemplary introductory activity facilitated during the folklore-themed sessions provided students with a brief history of Japan's traditional yōkai, followed by a group exercise to create and describe a modern-day supernatural creature. Students worked to define the everyday issues they faced (delayed public transport, technical faults, lack of sleep, stress or tiredness from studying etc.) and applied the causation of these concerns to yōkai that they would then have to present to the class. The exercise allowed students to not only transition to English usage but moreover, forced them to think critically about the nature of traditional folklore and its application to modern-day life. Furthermore, the task required students to think, describe and present their ideas aloud to their classmates in a succinct and clear manner, thus preparing them for the activities delivered later in the FLOW class.

2. Themed photographic analysis exercise (+directed questions)

After the theme of the session has been formally introduced, students are required to undertake a short photographic analysis exercise. During Week 1 learners are informed of the typical activities that make up (this) FLOW class's syllabus and some time is spent discussing the importance of critical reflection and visual prompts, as well as their placement and use within the course. Students are given a brief introduction to semiotics and are provided with the necessary vocabulary surrounding the subject (namely denotation and connotation) so as to further understand the analysis tasks that are to be set. Both the purpose and structure of the exercise are simple in their conception: a different image is projected for ten minutes each week, followed by fifteen minutes of feedback. Students work in groups of three to firstly ascertain what it is that they are looking at and then to find the best words available (to their knowledge) in order to describe the subject of the image to the rest of their class. Secondly, each group provides a critical response to the photograph, attempting to decipher the various cultural codes that they think apply. Thirdly, students should describe what they think the

intended 'meaning' of the image/photographer is.

Student feedback has consistently shown that students place the image analysis exercise as one of the most important activities in the development of their proficiency and confidence in English language when taking this class. The task affords students an engaging and fast-paced exercise in questioning their own cultural biases and formally expressing their opinions in a second language to an audience. As such, students following this activity are well practiced in the academic argumentation and clarifying of their thoughts in English by the end of the seven-week course.

The themes of the images shown to students vary and are selected independent of the cultural enquiry taking place within that week's class. However, Week 5 presents an exception as the photograph displayed (Fig. 2) is designed specifically to prompt students into thinking critically about the way they consider folkloric narratives to be developed. In addition to identifying the subject of the photograph, students are encouraged to work in their groups to develop a ghostloric narrative that they can attribute to the image — in other words, they are asked to create and orate a ghost story that reflects the analysis they have made of the image in question. The exercise allows students an opportunity to consider the cultural differences in ghost stories and folklore, the geographic specificities of belief systems and offers an insight into the ways in which narratives might unfold and

Figure 2. Image of All Saints Church, Oxwick, UK. Photograph taken by author.

develop around them. Furthermore, through this exercise, learners actively work to expand their vocabulary and practice their presentation skills.

What might initially appear as a 'lighthearted' approach to language learning is, I would argue, a task embedded with the fundamentals of critical thought, comparative analysis and advanced language skills necessary to work in English. Photographic analysis makes use of critical thinking in its widest conception, promoting [1] core skills in critical argumentation (reasoning and inference making), [2] critical judgments, [3] critical-thinking, dispositions and attitudes, [4] critical being and critical actions, [5] societal and ideology critique, and [6] critical creativity or critical openness (Davies and Barnett, 2015: 08). By reflecting on the composition, colour, *mise-en-scène* and tone of the image, students are motivated to consider the ways in which the exterior world (and its fictions) come to be represented. That the image displayed is imbued with spectral connotations, on account of the subject's architectural style, monochromatic palette, situation etc. coerces students to consider the universal or trans-cultural folkloric representations that they have been exposed to and to analyse them through language-based processes.

3. Probes: Discussion and Reflections

As a fluency-based workshop, the main body of the FLOW class is used for discussion and presentation of ideas in a formal academic style. In preparation for the task, students are asked to record a two-minute video discussing their thoughts on the origins of folklore and a second video narrating a short ghost story, contemporary folktale, urban legend or supernatural encounter that they are aware of. The purpose of this initial exercise is to promote pre-class research, enriching and enlivening the discussion that takes place in the FLOW class itself. Moreover, the homework tasks provide an opportune moment for students to familiarize themselves with the discussion subject and prepare necessary research in order to engage in formal academic discussion within the classroom. As set out in the introduction to this paper, students taking my FLOW class are encouraged to make use of the PER model of argumentation, requiring them to make a *point*, utilize *evidence* to support their claim, before entering into

reflection on the uses and criticisms of what they have presented to the class. Following such an approach, I believe, instills a higher level of confidence in language learners and raises the effectiveness of the arguments they put forward in class. The dependence on fact or research-based findings enables students to construct solid, reasoned critiques with the support of evidence bolstering their claims.

For the main 'Cultural Enquiry' exercise students are divided into groups of three or four and given approximately twenty minutes to discuss a series of questions related to the class theme. The questions set out for the folklore session's group discussion are as follows:

1. What do you think is/was the role of *yūrei, yōkai* and other supernatural entities in traditional Japanese beliefs?
2. Do people still fear the supernatural in the same way today as they did in the past? Why/Why not? (Please give examples).
3. Are you aware of any ghost stories and/or urban legends that are still believed in today? Are there modern-day *yūrei*?
4. How important do you think folklore and superstition are for contemporary Japanese culture and identity?
5. Why are so many of Japan's ghosts women?
6. Can you think of any contemporary cultural texts (film, literature, theatre etc.) where ghosts and folklore play a primary role?
7. Do you consider yourself a skeptic or a believer? Why/Why not?

The questions delivered to the students are designed as prompts, each one probing them to consider the subject of folklore or ghost stories from a different angle (cultural history, education, identity, gender, popular culture, belief). Each group selects and addresses the questions that most appeal to them, thus the culminating whole-class discussion benefits from a range of ideas and opinions that would otherwise not be possible given the time constraints of the class. Students are able to follow the questions along whatever critical trajectory they feel appropriate and so have freedom to explore the subject of their enquiry in some

depth, with each student having time to reflect on and present their own opinion.

4. Summary/Discussion

The final section of the class is reserved for whole-group discussion. In this task, the groups are required to summarise their thoughts on the questions they addressed, explaining their opinions, evidence and reflections on the topics discussed. Each group is given approximately five minutes in order to complete their summary before the whole class moves on to consider the cross-cultural nature of folklore and ghost stories, reflecting on any differences they perceive in the folk narratives of Japan and other countries. This exercise prompts students to confront the relationship between geography, narrative and culture and to reflect on the roles of cultural praxis and belief, both in historical and contemporary identity making. Furthermore, students analyse the symbolic act of storytelling, the uses of narrative and the ways in which language evolves as determined by the culture it is set within. Questioning the idea that folklore is a knowledge of sorts, students work to deconstruct the manner in which narrative aids in their learning about the world around them. That each student is required to identify patterns in folkloric narrative, make use of subject-specific vocabulary and express their opinion on the subject in an academic style through formal presentation, ensures that their fluency and confidence in English language is promoted throughout the class, in addition to the necessary critical thinking required to tackle such complex subjects.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has been twofold: firstly, to promote the value of folklore as a subject through which English language acquisition can be gained in the FLOW classroom via a content-based approach, and secondly, to demonstrate the uses of folkloric and ghostloric narratives in critical thinking and cross-cultural comparative exercises for high-proficiency learners of English. Regarding the former, I suggest that the use of folklore as a basis for language classes is an accessible and well received model for English education, providing a platform on

which learners might experiment with storytelling, develop their vocabulary and learn to consider the importance of language in communal education. Furthermore, that folklore and ghost stories follow clearly identifiable language patterns positions them as conduits through which students can learn about and exercise language skills in a familiar terrain. In this sense, by making use of stories that the student is already well acquainted with, the language teacher can easily develop content-based learning activities that build upon the learner's existing knowledge. That folklore is so ubiquitous, with regard to both its cultural praxis and products in Japan and internationally (within film, literature, music, theatre and so on), makes it a readily available subject through which to develop discussion exercises and presentation activities whilst minimizing the need for research *extra muros*.

A further benefit of folklore, or at least a useful characteristic that might be attributed to aiding the learner, is that there exists a certain 'distance' in the language between the student and the narratives presented. Unlike those tasks that require students to discuss personal thoughts or opinions and which Japanese students are known to be apprehensive to engage in (Cantelli and Rizzo, 2016; Harumi, 2001; King, 2013), folklore and ghost stories present the narratives of others, they are the stories of other people. We might, then, distill a certain confidence in the narrating of tales (in English) that are promoted as 'second-hand': these are tales told about somebody else, spoken in somebody else's language.

To the second claim, that folklore and ghost stories can be utilized for the purposes of critical thinking, the initial sections of this paper have worked to introduce the value of folklore as an intersectional, trans-disciplinary approach to the study of culture. That folk literature at once works to condense the specific cultural norms of the society that it has been formed in whilst remaining legible to a multiplicity of readers, suggests that its place in cross-cultural comparative work should not be overlooked. Taylor's (1997, 2000) demonstration of the core language skills embedded within the analysis of folklore, together with Tangherlini's consideration of modern folklore as integral to the teaching of racial and ethnic equality (amongst a number of other societal benefits) within the urban classroom (and beyond)

further suggests the importance of folklore as a tool with which to teach language students in Higher Education.

I have gone some way in explaining both the importance and positive reception of the inclusion of folklore in my own pedagogical practice, and have attempted to outline the manner in which I have integrated the subject into my English language classroom. Though my experience has been limited to high-proficiency students of the FLOW program, application of these methods to classes for lower proficiency learners of English would be equally plausible, particularly in activities based around narrative development and language patterns. To conclude, then, the ultimate benefit(s) of the use of the folkloric subject and its application in the language learning classroom, is that it has been demonstrably effective in motivating students to practice spoken English, to develop their confidence and to gain fluency of the language.

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