

A REAPPRAISAL OF TONGUE TWISTERS AS LANGUAGE-TEACHING MATERIALS

By Theodore H. Quock and Mariko Miyajima

Synopsis:

Tongue twisters and other forms of wordplay exist in virtually all cultures. They clearly predate the academic study of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, but in recent times they have generally fallen into disuse for purposes other than the teaching of pronunciation. This article explores the nature of tongue twisters in various languages, current attitudes towards tongue twisters among teachers of both English and Japanese, and potential uses for tongue twisters in the contemporary language teaching classroom.

I . Introduction

Tongue twisters and similar forms of wordplay seem to exist in almost every language. The “1st International Collection of Tongue Twisters” (Reck) lists examples from 49 different languages. However, the application of tongue twisters to both English and Japanese language teaching – particularly in Japan – seems to be mainly a thing of the past. It has generally been used only for pronunciation practice which, in recent years, has often been given a lower priority in light of the rise of content-based, communicative task-based teaching. This study proposes that tongue twisters be reconsidered as a viable resource on the grounds that they are

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authentic materials that can be exploited for not only teaching pronunciation but also for a variety of content-based, communicative activities.

II. *Current Situation*

There has been a trend in recent years away from traditional rote language teaching towards communicative, content-based teaching, leading many university curricula away from traditional textbooks in favor of authentic materials and many publishers to produce more content-oriented materials.

This trend does have certain negative aspects. For one, many teachers are finding themselves having to shoulder more of the responsibility for materials selection, procurement and development. While this is to a certain extent positive – even desirable – it does increase the work load and time commitment of individual teachers who are already burdened by class preparation, marking /grading and student consultation in addition to their cumulative lesson time. Utilizing authentic materials often entails transcribing their audio content, drawing up vocabulary lists and writing worksheets for classroom /language lab use. This can be a daunting task, especially for part-time teachers who have to divide their attention among two or more schools, usually without the resources that full-time teachers have. There is also the problem of length, in that many authentic materials (e.g., movies, TV shows, songs, literary works) are so long that they have to take up a sizable amount of lesson time or be used in abridged form. On the other hand, many content-based text materials may be found lacking because they are not authentic enough, not current enough, and not geared precisely to the level and needs of the students in question.

Let us turn our attention now to two characteristics of authentic materials, as opposed to language-teaching materials (i.e., materials created for teaching purposes). To begin with, they are more representative

of the kind of language and communicative situations that students might encounter outside of the classroom. While this can make them more intimidating for less- confident and /or less- motivated students, the cachet of authenticity can also make them more interesting and inspiring. Secondly, authentic materials already exist and therefore do not need to be created anew. Dubbing a TV news report or a scene from a movie is certainly much less of an effort than creating a scenario from scratch and then recording it on audio tape and /or videotape. The challenge then lies in how to render those materials appropriate for the target students.

With the above in mind, the authors would like to submit the argument that tongue twisters are authentic materials. The instinctive reaction would probably be to disregard this suggestion on the grounds that tongue twisters are obvious linguistic contrivances and therefore not authentic. Looking at movies, news reports and songs, however, there seems to be no argument against their being classified as authentic materials. But in their own way, they are equally contrived: the difference is that tongue twisters are designed to highlight certain phonemes or combinations of phonemes, while other authentic materials are usually designed to focus on content and stylistics. Moreover, the high incidence of alliteration in modern English proves that the *raison d'être* behind tongue twisters is alive and well in everyday English.

Real people:	Calvin Klein, Steven Spielberg
Adopted names:	Marilyn Monroe, Roy Rogers
Fictional characters:	Peter Pan, Clark Kent
Places:	Sun City, Cape Cod
Books:	<i>The Peter Principle, The War of the Worlds</i>
Films:	<i>Leaving Las Vegas, Dirty Dancing</i>
TV shows:	“The Wild Wild West,” “Sesame Street”
Food items:	French fries, cotton candy

Idiomatic expressions:	do or die, short shrift
Popular nomenclature:	The Big Bang, sweet sixteen
Proverbs:	<i>Waste not, want not.</i> <i>No news is good news.</i>

Note that the above list includes only alliteration. Other forms of wordplay – such as assonance (Arthur Andersen) and rhyme (true blue) – are also prevalent in modern English. It is therefore their ubiquity in everyday life, rather than the process of their creation, that renders all of these materials – not only movies, news reports and songs but also tongue twisters – authentic. As with other authentic materials, then, the question is not whether, but how, tongue twisters can be exploited for meaningful teaching purposes.

Tongue twisters present themselves as ideal materials for pronunciation practice because they are contrived to feature a denser – than – normal concentration of target sounds. However, when they are used for teaching purposes, meaning is very rarely addressed because the content is regarded as being equally contrived. The fact that some English – language tongue twisters are phrases (e.g., rubber baby buggy bumpers) rather than complete sentences probably dissuades many teachers from even thinking about their meanings. Moreover, because tongue twisters are not viewed as having significant meaning, using them would call for a break in the lesson in order to introduce an independent component, rather than a transition to a related component of an integrated lesson. This further discourages language teachers from using them.

III. *Findings of Research*

Three approaches were taken to try to determine attitudes towards, and usage of, tongue twisters in language teaching:

- A review was made of recent academic literature on both English

teaching and Japanese teaching. This revealed no writings on the subject of tongue twisters, aside from casual mention of their use in pronunciation training – i.e., the "tongue twister effect" (MsCutchen, 1983).

- A review was made of ELT and JLT commercial textbooks currently in print. However, the only current ELT publications featuring tongue twisters are pronunciation books and other speaking-oriented texts.
- A survey on the use of tongue twisters was conducted among teachers of both English and Japanese in Japan. A questionnaire was distributed among 20 EFL teachers specializing in secondary /tertiary education and 20 JFL teachers. Due to the smaller number of teachers of Japanese to speakers of other languages, the subjects for this part of the questionnaire were not restricted to those teaching exclusively in secondary school (i.e., junior high or high school) and/or university. Below are the results of the survey.

A. Teachers of English as a Foreign /Second Language

1. Which phonemes do you think are most difficult for your students?

RANK	SOUND (S)	TEACHERS (out of 20)
1	r / l	12
2	θ / ð	9
3	ʃ	9
4	f / v	7

2. Have you ever used tongue twisters in your classes?

YES	NO
14	6

3. If "Yes," how have you used them?

USAGE	TEACHERS
For fun.	7
For pronunciation practice (repetition, minimal pairs).	4
As a warmer or filler.	2
For reading practice.	1
As a simple oral exercise.	1

If "No," why?

REASON	TEACHERS
They are too easy for my students.	0
They are too difficult for my students' level.	0
Using tongue twisters is too threatening for my students.	0
There is no time to do them in class.	0
They have no relation to my teaching objectives.	4
I have never thought about it.	2
Other	0

4. Which tongue twisters have you used in class?

TONGUE TWISTER	TEACHERS
She sells seashells by the seashore. [and variations]	11
Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. [and variations]	7
How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck would chuck wood?	3
Other	1

5. Why did you choose those particular ones?

REASON	TEACHER
They are the only ones I know.	5
For pronunciation practice.	5
For fun.	1
To teach cultural literacy.	1
They were in the textbook.	1

B. Teachers of Japanese as a Foreign Language

1. Which phonemes do you think are most difficult for your students?

RANK	SOUND (S)	TEACHERS (out of 20)
1	っ (or t-)	9
2	ず	4
3	く	2

2. Have you ever used tongue twisters in your classes?

YES	NO
10	10

3. If "Yes," how have you used them?

USAGE	TEACHERS
As a warmer.	2
As a demonstration of Japanese tongue twisters.	2
As a demonstration of students' native languages.	1
As speaking practice, building from phrase level to sentence level.	1
For fun /stimulation.	1

If “No,” why ?

REASON	TEACHERS
They are too easy for my students.	0
They are too difficult for my students' level.	0
Using tongue twisters is too threatening for my students.	1
There is no time to do them in class.	4
They have no relation to my teaching objectives.	3
I have never thought about it.	3
Other (There are no systematic tongue twisters for beginners, so I make up words and phrases in <i>romaji</i>)	1

4. Which tongue twisters have you used in class?

TONGUE TWISTERS	TEACHERS
なまむぎなまごめなまたまご。	2
となりのきゃくはよくかきくうきゃくだ。	2
にわには二羽にわとりがいる。	2

5. Why did you choose those particular ones?

REASON	TEACHERS
For pronunciation practice.	3
They were part of the curriculum.	2
They were relevant to the lesson.	1
For fun.	1
As warmers.	1
They are the only ones I know.	1
They are good for students who are not used to Japanese.	1

IV. *Analysis and Interpretation of Findings*

The fact that there is no existing literature on the subject of tongue twisters attests tacitly to the current perception that tongue twisters are not useful. The absence of tongue twisters among current comprehensive coursebooks and speaking texts further reinforces the perception that they have become outmoded for teaching purposes.

The most natural application for tongue twisters is to help students practice the L2 phonemes they find the most difficult to produce and /or discern from listening. The question is whether or not the teacher knows any such tongue twisters. In the survey, seven of 40 teachers implied that they might have used tongue twisters more if they knew more of them.

The phonemes perceived by teachers as being the most difficult for their students were /r / vs. /l / in English and /ɽ / in Japanese. Looking at the most commonly used tongue twisters in both languages, none of them stress these sounds. /r / and /l / appear in the English ones, but only in terminal or penultimate position, which does not provide a useful contrast. Of the top three phonemes cited by English teachers, only ʃ - (which ranked third) appears at all. This mismatch can easily lead to the conclusion that tongue twisters are therefore not appropriate for language teaching. However, it must be remembered that the most famous tongue twisters in any language/culture were created for children and other native speakers of the language, not for speakers of other languages – this reinforces the authors' assertion that tongue twisters are authentic materials. Additional evidence is the fact that tongue twisters – whether in the form of sentences or phrases – have meaning. If they were designed purely to help L2 learners purely overcome pronunciation pronunciation, their meanings might well be irrelevant.

The conclusion that tongue twisters are not appropriate for language teaching is based on three premises, all of which can be proven to be

fallacious.

- *The only tongue twisters worth using are famous ones.* This is more of an instinctive conclusion than a conscious decision – in fact, there is a large number of existing tongue twisters, especially in English and Japanese. Aside from the aforementioned website, which lists over 200 English-language tongue twisters, there are various books which are nothing more than lists of tongue twisters. Another alternative for the more enterprising teacher is writing original tongue twisters. Some examples are provided in Section V.
- *The content of tongue twisters does not merit attention.* As most tongue twisters are sentences, they obviously do convey some kind of meaning. Original tongue twisters can be tailored for a wide range of topics.
- *Tongue twisters can only be used for pronunciation practice.* Since tongue twisters are generally created as a form of pronunciation practice, it is only natural that they be used for that purpose. However, that does not mean that they cannot be used for other purposes as well.

This leads to two criteria for making tongue twisters more appropriate for language teaching: to make sure the target phonemes are ones that the students may have difficulty with, and to make the tongue twisters a part of the lesson rather than a deviation from it. Given the increase in content-based, communicative teaching, this means using tongue twisters in like fashion. When it comes to original tongue twisters, this can be accomplished by tailoring the content to match that of the rest of the lesson. That said, however, deliberately written tongue twisters – whether or not they are thematically related to the rest of the lesson – can be inherently interesting enough to be presented as independent activities. This would satisfy the needs of teachers who are looking for warmers or

fillers.

V. *Implications for Teaching*

This section presents some ways in which the authors have devised and used tongue twisters for communicative activities.

A. Having the students read given tongue twisters as quickly as possible. In Danny Kaye's recording of the song *Tongue Twisters*, he sings ten lengthy tongue twisters at high speed – the entire song runs 2 minutes 12 seconds, but if the instrumental introduction and segues and choruses are omitted, Kaye's singing time is only 68 seconds. This is a useful icebreaker for tongue twister activities because it sets an example for the students that, because of Kaye's remarkable vocal talents, they won't feel disappointed about being unable to equal.

Explanation: The way this has been done has generally been to give the students a list of the tongue twisters contained in the song or the complete lyrics to the song (including the introduction and chorus) and have them practice reading it in small groups. Then the Danny Kaye recording has been played, with either Kaye's singing time or the running time of the full song set as a target for the students to try to match. Working in small groups, it is clear what each student is supposed to do, and motivation is provided in the competitive aspect of the task (i.e., racing against each other or racing against Kaye's standard). Afterwards, having the students with the fastest times perform again for the entire class gives them a moment in the spotlight. While some will not beat or even match their original times, it doesn't really matter because the second reading doesn't have to be timed. The point of having them do it again is not to prove that they did it, but simply to give the rest of the class a good example of fast reading as an example of fluency training.

B. Man-on-the-street interviews with various residents of Honolulu, Hawaii, and informal interviews with language specialists at the University of Hawaii – supported by the contents of the “1st International Collection of Tongue Twisters” – revealed that there are no tongue twisters in the Hawaiian and Samoan languages. This is probably due, at least in part, to two factors: they contain a relatively small number of phonemes, and they have many long words. These factors combine to create languages that, to non-native speakers, seem to be largely composed of tongue twisters. A good example is a Hawaiian variety of fish called *humuhumunukunukuapuaa*. While this species is so rare that it is best known as the answer to a linguistic trivia question (What is the smallest fish in the world?), its name is relatively well-known in much of the United States. In fact, it is even used as a joke in Leon Redbone’s recording of the standard *My Little Grass Shack*, in which guest performer Ringo Starr – a native speaker of British English – gets tongue-tied trying to sing the word *humuhumunukunukuapuaa*. Nonsense words, or gibberish, are generally used for nonsensical concepts (e.g., *mumbo-jumbo*, *gobbledygook*) or as onomatopoeia (e.g., *clickety-clack*, *pitter patter*). As stated above, tongue twisters have meaning, and comprehension of that meaning is one barometer of a language learner’s skills. Having students recite or even sing *My Little Grass Shack* can demonstrate how a seemingly nonsensical word can actually have a concrete meaning.

The same objective can be accomplished by having the students read phonetic transcriptions of either prose or song lyrics from languages none of them have studied before. One example is *Toad Song*, by Hawaiian pop star Keali’i Reichel.

Explanation: The song is rendered completely in Hawaiian and the lyrics and English translation are provided in the CD package.

Hawaiian being very similar to Japanese in terms of phonetics, the students can easily read the lyrics aloud. It will seem like utter nonsense to them at first, except for the more perceptive ones who will catch the word *aloha* towards the end of the song. Hearing the song and reading the English lyrics reinforces the notion that it has a concrete meaning.

The authors have experimented with having the students, before hearing the song, reading the lyrics aloud – first the alphabetic transcription and then transcribed in *hiragana* (with no spacing to separate words.) Perhaps unsurprisingly, students have with very few exceptions recorded faster times reading in *hiragana*, even though the text has no meaning to them. This argues that Japanese students are more comfortable reading in *hiragana* than in *romaji*., even if the text has no meaning.

- C. Most Japanese university students have a foreign language requirement other than English. Presenting them with tongue twisters in those other languages is a way of setting up a fluency - training activity in a non - threatening way. It also presents different challenges for different students, thereby reducing the risk of a contagion of intimidation among them. Presented in the right light, this can also give some students a moment in the spotlight to demonstrate something that many of their peers cannot do. As a follow - up, they can even be asked to try to teach some of the new phonemes to their classmates.

Some of the more well - known tongue twisters from selected languages are given below, with their English translations provided in italics.

LANGUAGE	TONGUE TWISTER
French	Un chasseur sachant chasser sans son chien de chasse est un bon chasseur. <i>A hunter hunting deer without his hunting dog is a good hunter.</i>
German	Frische Fische fischt Fischers Fritz. Fischers Fritz fischt Frische Fische. <i>Fresh fish fish for Fritz of the Fischer family. Fritz of the Fischer family fishes for fresh fish.</i>
Spanish	Pedro Picapiedra pica pica pica piedras. Una piedra que picaba Picapredra no picaba. <i>Peter Tillstone breaks, breaks, breaks stones. A stone broken by Tillstone didn't break.</i>
Mandarin	四是四，十是十。十四是十四，四十是四十。十四不是“私事”，四十不是“死屍”。 <i>Four is four, ten is ten. Fourteen is fourteen, forty is forty. Fourteen is not a private affair, forty is a body.</i>
Cantonese	掘金掘吉掘雞骨。 <i>Digging for gold, digging for fortune, digging for chicken bones.</i>
Korean	Ap jibe sa nun bupak baksanun Park Bupak baksaigo, dwe jibe sa nun bupak baksanun Bak Bupak baksaida. <i>The doctor of law who lives in front of my house is Dr. Park, and the doctor of law who lives in back of my house is Dr. Bak.</i>

Students can even have fun trying to read tongue twisters from languages that are totally unknown to any of them.

LANGUAGE	TONGUE TWISTER
Arabic	Battatna battat baten battatkom, tegdar battatkom etbot baten battatna methel ma battatna battat baten battetkom. <i>Our duck blew up your duck's stomach. Can your duck blow up our duck's stomach like our duck blew up your duck's stomach?</i>
Dutch	De zoon van de knappe kapper kapt nog knapper dan de knappe kapper kapt. <i>The son of the handsome hairdresser dresses [hair] even better than the handsome hairdresser dresses [hair].</i>
Mongolian	Ebudug ii ebudug eyer ebuduglehu du Ebuduglegsen ebudug ebudhu uu? Ebuduglegulehu ebudug obudhu uu? <i>Use a knee to knee another knee. Is the knee being kneed, or the knee doing the kneeling sore?</i>
Welsh	Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwynndrobwllsan cysiliogogoch <i>St. Mary's Church in the hollow of the white hazel near a rapid whirlpool and the church of St. Tysilio of the red cave (Longest village name in Britain)</i>

- D. There is an old campfire song called *Bottom of the Lake* which begins with a relatively short core sentence then, line by line, adds new information that makes each successive line so much longer. This is not a traditional tongue twister in that the difficulty comes not from the usage of particular phonemes; rather, it might be called a “telescopic tongue twister” that can be extended by adding on new information to each line. This particular example is a blend of two different patterns, *Bottom of the Lake* and a Japanese party game. *Bottom of the*

Lake begins with the line “There’s a log on the bottom the lake,” which extends to “There’s a hole in the log on the bottom of the lake” and continues step by step until it finally becomes “There’s a germ on the dust on the nit on the gnat on the flea on the fly on the hair on the wart on the frog in the hole on the log in the bottom of the lake.” This can be done as a reading / memorization task with any level of student.

In the party game, the players have to make round - robin self - introductions, with each person reciting information about all of the preceding speakers. For example, the first speaker would say “Sony no Morita desu” and the next “Sony no Morita no tonnari no Kurosawa desu. Eiga no kantoku desu.” The final speaker in a group of five might therefore say “Sony no Morita - san no tonnari no eiga no kantoku no Kurosawa - san no tonnari no Botchan o kaitta Natsume - san no tonnari no chou [butterfly] ga suki na Mori - san no tonnari no Nomo desu. New York ni sunde imasu.” This can be made more topical – and challenging – by converting it into a current events quiz about the heads of state of major industrial nations, beginning with the core sentence “The 1998 Summit participants included U.S. President Bill Clinton.” and building up to “The 1998 Summit participants included U.S. President Bill Clinton, Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, French President Jacques Chirac, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi and Russian President Boris Yeltsin.

- E. The meanings of tongue twisters can be the focus of either verbal or non - verbal tasks by having the students paraphrase, draw pictures or even take dictation.

Example: *The right light is right over the light typewriter on the right.* A typing room contains two columns of typewriters, some of

which are lightweight because they are portable; the lightbulb in the lamp directly above one of them has burned out. The electrician has been called and is asking which appliance needs fixing.

Example: *This watch is second-hand, and this watch's second hand is second-hand.* There are two watches; one is used and the other is completely new except for the second hand (indicator), which is used.

- F. The meanings of tongue twisters can be dealt with in a more traditional way by having the students make grammatical and lexical substitutions.

Example: *The sixth sheik's sixth sheep's sick.* Possible changes include verb tense (from simple present to present perfect, past, future, etc.), number – i.e., singular vs. plural – and / or numbers – i.e., specific or indefinite numerical values (from sixth to any other ordinal number), and categories of words (from *sheik* to other types of leaders, from *sheep* to other kinds of animals, from *sick* to other physical conditions or other problems).

Example: The students can be asked to make substitutions that will change the context of any tongue twister to match their topic of their lesson. The above example, for instance, can be changed to *The United States' 42nd president is distressed.*

- G. Another form of wordplay that can be useful is coded language. A well-known example is Pig Latin. If a word begins with a consonant sound or consonant cluster, a suffix is added which begins with that sound / cluster and ends with “- ay.” The suffix “- way” is added to words beginning with a vowel sound. *Tongue twister* thereby becomes *ongue-tay ister-tway* and *English* becomes *English-way*.

Example: The students can translate any text (on, therefore, any topic) into Pig Latin and read it aloud for each other to decode back

into standard English.

Needless to say, the authors are not advocating that the fundamental purpose of tongue twisters – i.e., pronunciation practice – be ignored. In fact, there are many students in advanced – level classes in both formal education and language school who have little difficulty communicating at a high level on a wide range of topics, including technical and abstract matters, but still have problems with certain L2 phonemes. Just as tongue twisters, like other authentic materials, can allow some teachers to digress from assigned text materials and interject some content – based work into their lessons (even if only as a warmer or filler), they can also allow teachers who only do content – based teaching with authentic materials to make their overall syllabi more comprehensive by including aspects of language such as pronunciation, which would otherwise (to cite one tongue – twisting idiom) certainly receive short shrift.

VI. *Summary*

This article has proposed a redefinition of tongue twisters and related forms of wordplay as authentic materials that can be exploited not only for pronunciation practice but for a wide range of language – and content – based activities that can be appropriate for all levels of language learners. These activities can provide a change of pace for any kind of lesson by changing the activity but not necessarily the subject matter. Such activities would constitute no threat to an existing syllabus – rather, they can actually contribute by giving them greater breadth.

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