

# The Language Teacher

*The Language Teacher (TLT)* is the bimonthly publication of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). It publishes articles and other material related to language teaching, particularly in an Asian context. *TLT* also serves the important role of publicizing information about the organization and its many events.. As a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting excellence in language learning, teaching, and research, JALT has a rich tradition of publishing relevant material in its many publications.



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## Conclusion

Reflective practice as it is outlined in this short article is much more than taking a few minutes to mull over our teaching. Most teachers do this anyway. Reflective practice as it is outlined here is evidence-based because teachers systematically gather data about their teaching and use this information to make informed decisions about their practice. In addition, reflective practice also means teachers enter a dialogue with themselves and other teachers so that they can reach a new level of awareness and understanding of their practice. This dialogue can occur with the self, a critical friend, and/or in a teacher reflection group. The dialogue is supportive and sympathetically challenging so that individual teachers can reach a level of awareness of what they do and why they do it. Indeed, I would like to invite all readers to join me to reflect during the JALT2014 conference where I am excited to speak.

## Reference

Farrell, T. S. C. (2007). *Reflective practice: From research to practice*. London, UK: Continuum Press.

**Thomas S. C. Farrell** is Professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada. His professional interests include reflective practice, and language teacher education and development. Professor Farrell has published widely in academic journals and has presented at major conferences worldwide on the topic of reflective practice. A selection of his recent books include *Reflecting on Teaching the Four Skills* (Michigan University Press, 2012), *Reflective Writing for Language Teachers* (Equinox, 2013), *Reflective Practice* (TESOL Publications, 2013), and *Reflective Practice in ESL Teacher Development Groups: From Practices to Principles* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). His webpage is <reflectiveinquiry.ca>.

# JALT2014 • JUNIOR PLENARY SPEAKER | 5



## Educating and entertaining with stories and songs

### An interview with Bill Harley

JALT Junior Plenary Speaker

Sponsored by Yokohama JALT

### Kristin Shitara

JALT Junior Program Chair

**B**ill Harley is a two-time Grammy award-winning artist and recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities. Bill uses song and story to paint a vibrant and hilarious picture of growing up, schooling, and family life. His work spans the generation gap, reminds us of our common humanity, and challenges us to be our very best selves. A prolific author and recording artist, Bill tours widely as an author, performing artist, and keynote speaker.



Visit <billharley.com> for more.

**KRISTIN SHITARA (KS):** You are described as a singer, storyteller, author, playwright, educator, and performing artist. Is there one of these identities that is most important to you?

**BILL HARLEY (BH):** I've never been able to choose. I guess one of the things I've always felt is that song and story go together. I see them as being just different expressions of each other or located on a continuum. And so I've always kind of fought against being defined one way or another. But I was really a performer first. But I would write material to perform. My mom was a children's writer. So writing was always something I knew people did. Then the teaching kind of comes as part of it. I've been an artist in residence in this school in Providence for 10 years. I went to the head of the school and said I'll work here regularly if you let me do anything I want because I wanted to try different things. So, I wrote songs for the kids. I wrote a play with the kids. But for the past three or four years I've been working on storytelling with third graders. I've learned some really interesting things about the connection between the oral language and written language.

**KS:** Since you have spent a lot of time in the school system, what do you see there that is going well or perhaps not going quite so well?

**BH:** This whole push over the past 20 years for high stakes testing has always been a concern to me. A lot of stuff I do isn't directly related to the test. Although I say, if kids can stand up in front of a group of people and tell a story, they are going to be OK, because there are so many elements involved in communication and language and sense of self that goes into that. When I first started working with the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teachers on storytelling I said, "Let's just try this for a year and see how it works." And so they were like, "Well, OK. We like you, Bill, so we will." But with each year they have become more convinced of its value.

**KS:** That is really exciting what you are doing with those kids. How did you make the choice to work with children when you were starting your career as a performer?

**BH:** Part of it was following my own nose about what was working. And I guess I am very comfortable with kids. I seem to have some sort of natural aptitude to relate to them. And when I was making my first record, I was trying to figure out if it was the kid record or the adult record and my friend who was producing it said, "Well, which one are people asking for?" I said, "They are asking for the kid record." And he said, "Well, make that one first." And so that is kind of the way it worked. Another thing is I've

always been concerned about issues involving social justice and this sense of giving a voice to those who don't have power. And that's kids. I feel like in some way I get to speak for what children are perceiving. So a lot of my work is not so much prescriptive about what they are supposed to be, but descriptive about who they are.

**KS:** I think you are doing a great job because I bought a few of your recordings and gave them to my daughter. She now listens to them every night before she goes to bed. And she just loves them.

**BH:** How old is she?

**KS:** She's eleven.

**BH:** That's great. I love performing for eleven year olds. That's right at the age when they are thinking, "I don't know . . . I'm supposed to pay more attention to my peers than I am to this guy." I love performing for them. They're smart.

**KS:** Right, they can follow the story. My little one is six and she had a little trouble following the story. Well, we have language and culture issues, too. But then she heard the *You're In Trouble* song and that drew her in, too.

**BH:** I have some CDs that are specifically aimed at primary grades and some for the older ones. Some of those long stories are a lot. But I'll be interested to be there [at the JALT conference] because I'm really interested in this connection of people hearing stories and what that does for their language. Over the years we have run into a lot of people from other countries who come up to us at the shows and say, "My kids listen to your recordings all the time and we've really found that it is one of the ways that they are learning the language." Because it's not just text, there's an emotional aspect to it.

**KS:** So, do you have a lot of experience performing for audiences whose linguistic or cultural backgrounds are different from yours?

**BH:** I can't say that I really do. I mean within the United States I have traveled around a lot, but I haven't done much work overseas. We were in New Zealand . . . it was a funny thing. I was doing school shows and I kept asking the kids "do you know what this is?" and finally one of the teachers said, "Bill, they watch American television all the time, it's no big deal." So, I can't say I have performed a lot in places where I walk

in and I am the only white guy there and I hope that the audience gets it.

**KS:** It is something that I wondered about with my daughter. The first story I chose to play for her was *The Great Sled Race* because we had just had this huge snow. I wondered if she would take to it since she has never been sledding before and even though we speak English at home, she doesn't hear much language from her peers in English. But it was not a problem. She liked it from the start.

**BH:** I do feel like my work is particularly American. But I feel like if they can understand the emotional aspect of the story, they can make connections and understand the specific story and the particular words. You learn by inference more than you do by direct teaching. We had friends over for dinner the other night and we were talking about Bill Cosby who was a big influence on me. One of the women said, "I listened to those stories and I didn't understand everything about what was going on, but it made me want to understand."

**KS:** That provides great motivation for someone learning another language. If they want to know what is going on then that's the key right there. So, what makes a good story and how do you approach creating a new one?

**BH:** I think what I am usually looking for is some universal in terms that a lot of people have had a similar experience. And then a lot of times I am looking for a memorable moment. So what I usually do is start with those moments that are emotionally strong that are usually moments of fear, joy or relief. Usually that moment is the climax of the story. And then I go back and build around that. And I think I do that even with my books. One of my books *Night of the Spadefoot Toads* is a book about a boy and his teacher who basically live in my town. This story came from an experience I had when a friend of mine who is a biologist and I went out one night in April. She took me to this vernal pool where this endangered species was and we stood there in the middle of a thunderstorm counting these toads and it was this really amazing experience that I'll always remember. And that became the center of that book. So I think you look for an emotional moment that has a lot of resonance that you hope you can communicate to people. And you hope you can build the plot or the story around it so when you get to that moment, it means something.

**KS:** What about your future? What are you working on now?

**BH:** I'm doing this series, *Charlie Bumpers*. The second one is coming out in a couple weeks and I'm just finishing the third one. And there are three more in that series. I'm also working on an opera with a friend of mine.

**KS:** Oh my goodness! That's quite an undertaking!

**BH:** Yeah, it's exciting and a little bit scary. He's a composer and I'll take care of the story and words. And I'm just starting to work with my agent on an outline for a book about storytelling for parents.

**KS:** That's an awesome idea. My girls love it when I make up stories for them, but I often get myself in a middle of a story and I can't find a good way out.

**BH:** Stories about who you are and what you did are the ones that they will remember. There are certain kinds of basic story structures that you can use. You can learn those and have them in your pocket to use to get you out of trouble.

**KS:** I can't wait for the book. And everyone is really excited to have you come to the conference. Thank you for your time today.

**BH:** Well, we are excited, too. We look forward to seeing you.

**Kristin Shitara** has been teaching ESL/EFL for 18 years and holds a M.A. in TESL from the University of Nevada, Reno. She has taught English in America, Ecuador, and Japan. She opened her own English school in 2003 in Minano, Japan, where she teaches students from 2 to 65 years old. She has been a member of JALT since 2002 and is currently the TCSIG and JALT Junior program chair. Her professional interests include reading instruction, technology in teaching, curriculum design and teacher training.



## JALT2014

Conversations Across Borders

Nov 21-24, 2014

Tsukuba International Congress Center, Tsukuba, Ibaraki

[jalt.org/conference](http://jalt.org/conference)