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## St. Nick Visits

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"No."

"Well, has anyone read this before?"

OK, so I was working under an inaccurate cultural assumption. This is Japan, and they don't have quite the same Christmas tradition we do in the United States. Sure, they knew about Santa Claus, the jolly old man in red, but that was about the extent of their Christmas experience.

We worked some more on the assignment. I helped them out by writing all the missing words, in random order, on the chalkboard. With those clues, the students were able to finish most of the poem. The difficult spots were the reindeers' names and some rhymes like "bow"/"snow" and "foot"/"soot" where the students were unsure of the pronunciation of one of the words.

What I thought would be a simple, enjoyable class activity turned out quite differently than I expected. It provided opportunities to introduce ideas about language and culture that I had not anticipated.

Of course, we talked about rhyming and how it's a traditional device in English poetry. But the poem also turned out to be a useful device, especially after I read it aloud, to show my students how poetry relies on rhythm. It wasn't as obvious as rhythm, but after I pointed out a few examples, the students were able to recognize Moore's use of alliteration too.

But the Christmas activity did more than just stimulate discussion about poetic

devices. I asked the students to describe what Santa Claus looked like. After they all gave a more or less common description of the jolly old elf, I asked them how they had learned what Santa Claus looked like. Pictures. Television. Books. Then I told them that the modern image of Santa Claus, the jolly, jelly-bellied, white-bearded man, was first popularized by Moore's poem.

Another cultural sidelight. As we were working, one of the students asked who Saint Nicholas was. And was he the same as Saint Nick? That gave me the chance to explain about 'nick' names (no connection, however, to the saint) and to explain the traditional legend of St. Nicholas. My Japanese students were surprised to learn that Santa Claus was really Saint Nicholas.<sup>1</sup>

After class, I felt that the activity had gone well, even though it did not turn out as I had expected. If we had had more time, we could have practiced pronunciation using the rhymed pairs. I could have pointed out archaic words and explained how the meanings of some of the words Moore used in writing the poem in the mid-1800's have changed. I might have even asked them to use rhymed pairs in writing brief poems of their own.

I didn't have time for all that, but I might the next time around. This winter, maybe you should let St. Nick visit your ESL/EFL classes too. You might be surprised what he brings to your students.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Santa Claus' is really a nickname itself. It comes from the Dutch 'Sinterklaas,' 'Sinter' (Saint) plus 'klaas' a short form of 'Niklaas' (Nicholas).

## A VISIT FROM SAINT NICHOLAS

by  
Clement Moore

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house  
 Not a creature was stirring, not even a \_\_\_\_\_.  
 The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,  
 In hopes that Saint \_\_\_\_\_ soon would be \_\_\_\_\_.  
 The children were nestled all snug in their \_\_\_\_\_,  
 While visions of sugarplums danced in their heads;  
 And Mamma in her kerchief, and I in my cap,  
 Had just settled our brains for a long winter's \_\_\_\_\_.  
 When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter  
 I sprang from my bed to see what was the \_\_\_\_\_.  
 Away to the window I flew like a \_\_\_\_\_,  
 Tore open the shutter, and threw up the sash.  
 The moon on the breast of the new-fallen \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gave a luster of midday to objects below.  
 When what to my wondering eyes should appear  
 But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny \_\_\_\_\_,  
 With a little old driver, so lively and quick,  
 I knew in a moment it must be Saint \_\_\_\_\_!  
 More rapid than eagles his coursers they came,  
 And he whistled and shouted and called them by \_\_\_\_\_.  
 "Now, Dasher! now, \_\_\_\_\_! now Prancer and Vixen!  
 On, \_\_\_\_\_! on, Cupid! on Donner and \_\_\_\_\_!  
 To the top of the porch, to the top of the \_\_\_\_\_,  
 Now, \_\_\_\_\_ away, dash \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ away all!"  
 As dry leaves that before the wild hurricane fly,  
 When they meet with an obstacle mount to the \_\_\_\_\_,  
 So, up to the housetop the coursers they flew,  
 With a sleigh full of toys—and Saint \_\_\_\_\_,  
 And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the \_\_\_\_\_  
 The prancing and pawing of each little hoof.  
 As I drew in my head and was turning \_\_\_\_\_.

Down the chimney \_\_\_\_\_ Nicholas came with a bound.  
 He was dressed all in fur from his head to his \_\_\_\_\_,  
 And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and \_\_\_\_\_.  
 A bundle of toys he had flung on his \_\_\_\_\_,  
 And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.  
 His eyes, how they twinkled! his dimples, how merry!  
 His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a \_\_\_\_\_;  
 His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,  
 And the beard on his chin was as white as the \_\_\_\_\_.  
 The stump of a pipe he held tight in his \_\_\_\_\_,  
 And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath.  
 He had a broad face and a little round belly  
 That shook, when he laughed, like a bowl full of \_\_\_\_\_.  
 He was chubby and plump—a right jolly old elf:  
 And I laughed when I saw him, in spite of \_\_\_\_\_;  
 A wink of his eye, and a twist of his \_\_\_\_\_,  
 Soon gave me to know I had nothing to dread.  
 He spoke not a word, but went straight to his \_\_\_\_\_,  
 And filled all the stockings: then turned with a jerk,  
 And laying his finger aside of his nose,  
 And giving a nod, up the chimney he \_\_\_\_\_.  
 He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a \_\_\_\_\_,  
 And away they all flew like the down of a thistle.  
 But I heard him exclaim, ere they drove out of sight,  
 "Happy Christmas to all, and to all a good-\_\_\_\_\_!"

#### About the Author

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## St. Nick Visits the EFL Classroom

Chris Crowe, Himeji Dokkyo University

It had been a long semester. My students and I were tired of our English conversation textbook, so I promised them a Christmas surprise for the last day of school before our winter vacation.

The surprise was Clement Moore's Christmas poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas." I gave each student a copy of the poem from which I had removed the last word of every other line [see appendix]. Their assignment was, I told them, to write in the missing words.

I expected it to be an easy task. They were university freshmen, Japanese students who had studied English for six years before entering the university. To make their assignment even easier, I explained to them that Moore's poem was written in rhymed couplets, that is, that each pair of lines rhymed. I put a few

examples of rhymed pairs on the board. The missing word, I told them, will rhyme with the last word in either the line before it or the line after it. Then I set them to their work.

As I circulated among the students, I saw that they were having a difficult time coming up with words to fill in the blanks. "What's the matter?" I asked. "Aren't you familiar with this poem?"

Silence.

"Come on, almost everyone knows this Christmas poem by heart."

"Uno, have you read it before?"

"No."

"Kobayashi, you?"

"No."

"Sakata, you have, haven't you?"

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