

# A Communicative Student-Centered Approach to Teaching Literature in the Japanese EFL Classroom

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# A Communicative Student-Centered Approach to Teaching Literature in the Japanese EFL Classroom

Brian T. Quinn

## Introduction

Japan has recently been making significant strides in establishing conscientious foreign language programs on the university level. Today most university students, majoring in fields other than English, typically have the opportunity to take up to eight semester English courses usually offered during the first two years of study at the liberal arts division of most college institutions. In addition, thanks to a gradual expanding of university administrative horizons, most non-English majors will even have the chance to take at least one course taught by a native English instructor. This means that Japanese students are getting a lot of contact time with English in the classroom. Typical English courses on the college level tend to deal with listening comprehension, writing, reading/translating and communicative interaction skills. At least one of the courses will usually consist of readings in literature possibly including a novel, excerpts, plays, short stories or even poetry.

The teaching of English literature in required foreign language curriculums used to be one of the most important areas of language study for many years. However, due to recent trends in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) methodology, the teaching of literature has steadily fallen into disfavor. Today it is not unusual to find a Japanese non-English major university student who has studied for ten years or more without ever having read an original English novel or even a full length short story for that matter. The sad truth is that the teaching of English literature for general students in liberal arts courses is quickly becoming a thing of the past. It is the simple objective of this study to demonstrate that the teaching of English literature does indeed still have a place in the EFL classroom in Japan and especially in EFL courses taught by native English instructors.

The teaching of English literature in the first two years of study at Japanese universities has traditionally been the domain of Japanese professors who take great pride in their ability to both accurately translate and transmit the artistic essence of the literary works studied. Native English instructors, whose numbers are steadily increasing among English faculties all over Japan, are normally relegated to the "skills courses" such as basic/intermediate English conversation and or discussion related courses of a general and practical nature. Ironically, many of these native English

instructors often have broad backgrounds in literature, however, most Japanese administrators have the impression that literature is best explained by Japanese natives.

There should be no doubt, however, that foreigners are just as capable of teaching literature to Japanese students. If anything, native English literature teachers have an inherently better feel for the type of language used by the author, the hidden meanings "between the lines" as well as a better understanding of the culture behind the work. In addition, instead of automatically trying to just translate what is being read, under the guidance of a native teacher, the students will begin to look at a prose work more in the manner that a native speaker would be expected to read the same passage.

### Why Teach Literature ?

Literature is still an excellent source for teaching both language skills and culture while greatly increasing the students' confidence. In addition, if taught in a friendly, non-threatening manner, it can help develop students who actually enjoy reading and will want to continue exploring the fascinating world of literature on their own, even when the course itself ends.

Collie and Slater have noted that : "...literature offers a bountiful and extremely varied body of written material which is 'important' in the sense that it says something about fundamental human issues, and which is enduring rather than ephemeral. Its relevance moves with the passing of time, but seldom disappears completely" (Collie and Slater : p.3, 1987). As a result, the teaching of Shakespearean plays, for example, continue to be taught with great success all over the world because of their timeless relevance to people and human nature even today. In this way outstanding literary works are often able to transcend both time and culture to speak directly to a reader in another country.

Another important aspect of teaching literature, is that the language to which the students are exposed is authentic and has not been watered down by EFL specialists into a generic bland product. Thus, the students have a chance to come into direct contact, often for the first time, with language that has been intended for native speakers. This experience can provide students with a great chance to expand their familiarity with various linguistic usages, writing styles and ways of intellectually looking at the world itself.

Besides greatly enriching the students' language base, literature can help the reader to significantly deepen his understanding of life in the country from which the prose work originates, be it America, England or Australia. It is at the same time important to remember that literature is by nature a 'created world' of its own and the reader has to be careful to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary. However, in spite of such inherent dangers associated with any prose text, a reader can, without a doubt, truly discover a great deal about the thoughts, feelings, social

customs and personal relationships of the particular country from which the selected prose work originates.

Reading literature can also obviously improve a student's overall vocabulary as well as sharpen their overall reading skills, due to the extensive reading that is always required when undertaking either a novel or a lengthy short story. Such extensive reading will gradually help the students to improve their ability to infer meanings from linguistic clues and context instead of always going to the dictionary for lexical help. The improvement of such essential skills goes a long way in making the students more independent in their overall reading ability.

Finally, an interesting literary text can be utilized as an excellent basis for extensive oral work in the language classroom. By having students regularly discuss, share opinions and debate among themselves, as well as with the teacher, not to mention the utilization of various written assignments, recordings and even movies, the students studying literature in such an environment can go on to make substantial progress in all the basic skills of language learning. The teaching of literature also provides a stimulus to the students' own creative and literary imagination which can enable them to develop a deeper appreciation of literature on a broad human scale to include a better understanding of their own native literature as well.

### **The Context of Teaching Literature in Japan**

Unfortunately, the teaching of literature in the EFL classroom has often been mishandled by over stressing grammatical structures, difficult lexical combinations and depending too much on translations. The teaching of literature has also been severely lacking in any comprehensive methodology when teaching non-native speakers. This results in the teaching of literature which has become an intensely boring business with students often too busy writing in translations of difficult passages to ever even respond to the text itself as a whole. In this way students often cannot see 'the forest for the trees', or, in other words, they lose the typical reader's interest in plot and character development due to the slow pace and overemphasis on nit-picking details during the translation/recitation type of class. The teaching of literature should instead seek to encourage responses from the students to what they have just read. Such responses can be either negative or positive, it really does not matter as long as the responses are strongly felt and the student is able to say why he likes or dislikes some aspect of the plot, character development or storyline.

It is this author's belief that the true objective of teaching literature in the EFL classroom should be to evoke a myriad of responses from all students and then to use these responses as a springboard for more expanded discussions closely related to the interests, tastes and feelings of the class as a whole. In this fashion it then becomes possible to truly integrate the study of English language with that of English literature

simultaneously and in a complimentary fashion.

These aforementioned responses should not be elicited just in the traditional form of classroom interaction between the teacher and the student, but can be even more advantageously exploited by the utilization of pair and small group discussions among the students themselves in a much less threatening atmosphere, while still under the watchful eye of the teacher.

Far too many literature teachers in Japan also tend to spend too much time on the delicate mastery of certain structural forms and or literal translations which, of course, frequently delivers an absolutely devastating blow to whatever student motivation might have existed at the beginning of the course. However, such attention to minor details is extremely easy to teach and is even easier to test and grade when administering final examinations on the course material. In using such methodology, the teaching of the English language in such literature classes is often reduced to a mechanistic formula with students required to look so closely to the written text that they gradually lose all sense of meaning of the actual story itself. As a result, there is very little taking place educationally that could be classified as literature in most freshman and sophomore survey English literature courses.

With the recent focus shifting towards communicative language teaching, literature is now being taught less and less in the EFL classroom since the greatest emphasis in language learning has been steadily changing to the more practical functions and purposes of language as merely a medium of communication. This trend is not at all a bad one and has resulted in the creation of numerous positive changes in foreign language education. In response to such changes, numerous new textbooks are being mass produced these days with practical prepackaged texts to which EFL students hardly need to have any response to at all. With such texts the students are only required to learn the patterns or practice the structures as they are presented to them. In other texts the students simply transcribe the correct listening passage or translate the appropriate sentences.

In contrast to such pragmatic materials, the teaching of literature in the student-centered classroom requires that a student respond personally to the text being studied. Such responses often lead to numerous expansions on topics or themes developing out of the passages discussed in class. By allowing the students to go off on thematic tangents of interest, the teacher is able to guide students into talking about things that they are really interested in. Thus, by regularly allowing students to exchange opinions and feelings, the teacher can eventually help the students to improve their overall communicative language proficiency as well as their appreciation of literature. In order to achieve this objective, the EFL teacher needs to carefully select texts that his students will both be interested in and able to relate to, which should thereby foster an environment where students will want to discuss and share their opinions regarding the work under study.

It is true, of course, that a lot of language learning can also take place on the lexical level as the teacher helps the students progress in their reading and overcome some of the more difficult areas in a given text. Yet, the primary object of the class can easily be shifted away from the text alone and transposed to the response, feelings and attitudes of the students as they actually read the work. This aspect is the essential ingredient in creating an open, enjoyable and non-threatening atmosphere for the students to actually explore works with their minds as free from traditional classroom constraints as possible.

In the teaching of English Literature to Japanese university students, it is important to get away from the teacher-centered, teacher controlled classroom in which the learners spend the overwhelming majority of the time just passively sitting back and taking in the information doled out by the teacher and only occasionally breaking the monotony by meekly responding to an occasionally close ended question concerning content or grammar in relation to the text. Such literature/reading classes not only stifle the students' imagination and limit their sense of self-expression but also reduce their motivation and may very well turn them against reading any kind of English literature for the rest of their lives. This last factor is probably the most incongruous of all, but it is a fact that many English literature teachers in Japan have a strong tendency to turn far more students away from the study of literature than the reverse. We English literature teachers should always keep in mind that one of the most important goals of the English literature teacher in EFL is to get students to actually have fun reading and find real enjoyment in reading a masterfully well written story together in class, which is not only entertaining but might even have a personal impact on their lives after the course is over.

Japanese teachers of English literature at Japanese universities almost universally teach their courses while using Japanese as the medium of communication. Such teachers often feel uneasy when trying to elicit student responses to the text itself as literature instead of conducting some linguistic exercises. This problem is further compounded by the fact that in Japanese secondary schools students are likewise almost never taught to respond to texts, even for native Japanese literature. Students are instead taught to absorb necessary standard information on the work in order to be able to accurately recite it when taking tests or entrance exams in the future. In such a universal teacher dominated environment, many Japanese literature teachers frequently fall back on to the all too comfortable strategy of teaching *about* literature, such as spending vast amounts of time giving students biographical facts about authors, descriptions of literary movements and critical schools, synopses of novels and plays, and so on, instead of actually teaching the actual work of literature itself.

Another highly popular trend in Japan is the existence of numerous courses on English and or American culture and literary background. Such courses are felt, in

Japan, to be essential to provide the necessary background information on important works to enable the non-native speaking student to eventually understand the English text. However, the great irony of such courses is that so much time is spent on presenting this information that it ultimately replaces the text as the basis of the course. It is also no mere coincidence that such background courses are also far easier to teach and test. So the teaching of English literature in Japan is still wrapped up in an essentially passive transmission mode of teaching in which the students sit back and passively take it in instead of taking the more active role of discovering what the author is trying to say on their own. Due to such traditions in methodology the students are often kept at a distance from the text owing to the teachers' ready-made explanations which discourage students to offer their own interpretations. It is true, of course, that the teaching of some background information regarding the author or historical background can indeed be helpful to the students' ultimate understanding of a story, but such information should be dealt with briefly and should never be the main thrust of the classwork.

As mentioned earlier, the only typical classes which in fact, deal with the text itself in Japan tend to go to the other extreme by consciously dissecting every word and sentence of the literary work at hand by having students laboriously translate the entire work while often progressing no more than one or two pages per class. The teaching of such a class requires almost no imagination or energy on the part of the teacher, since he has already translated the well used material years ago and need only go over the finer points of grammar and style where need be while the students translate the text passage by passage. Once again testing is done by mechanically choosing a few representative selections for the students to translate at exam time.

What is sorely needed in the teaching of literature to non-majors in Japan is a different methodology which takes a middle ground between the two extremes as stated above. In addition, there is an even greater need to shift the center of attention from the teacher to the students in order to allow the students to react to a literary text more in the way a native English speaker would when reading the same work. If a more relaxed atmosphere could be created in which there were no longer any standard synopses or traditional analyses imposed on the learners then they could be gradually coached on how to respond to what they are reading in a more personal manner. Student responses would then cover a wide range of reactions which is more in the spirit of true literature where the author has created a work in which the reader plays, not a passive role as is the case in Japan, but a centrally active role in what is taking place in the unfolding artistic process through his personal interaction with the text. Therefore, the primary purpose of this study is to show how the teaching of literature in the Japanese EFL classroom can successfully take advantage of this phenomenon and greatly expand the horizons of what can be accomplished of an interactive and communicative nature in the process.

One additional problem that the native English teacher will generally face when teaching literature, while following a more student-centered approach, is an enormous initial disparity of expectations between the teacher and the students in terms of teaching style. After years of passively inhaling numerous facts and data at school, the students in a freshman English literature class will naturally expect to be spoon-fed various pieces of information by the teacher which can later be easily committed to memory. So, if a native English EFL instructor suddenly expects the students to take a much more active role in both the analysis and interpretation of literary texts it will indeed take some time to allow the students to adjust to such a "radical" and "unconventional" approach. One last problem which the teacher will face when teaching such a class to the typical fifty or more students in a general education class will be the fact that every class will consist of a far from homogeneous group in terms of language instruction background and English ability. However, since the various personal responses to the texts will depend on each student's own ability, this should not present a major obstacle if flexible materials are carefully selected.

### **Selecting Appropriate Texts**

The selecting of the literary texts to be utilized in class seems to be one of the most critical factors in the eventual success of any course. A text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or cultural level will normally offer very few benefits to the students.

One common method of solving the problem of linguistic difficulty is by using simplified texts. There are several large series published both in Japan as well as abroad which are readily available to the teacher. Such materials are often appropriate to students of very limited ability, such as science track students at less rigorous private universities. However, in the long run such simplified texts in general present many disadvantages to literature teachers in that, while accurately presenting the storyline, they tend to produce a homogenized version and thus the students cannot get a real feel for the author's unique style. Therefore, it is recommended that the literature teacher select original texts which are considered relatively easy according to readability counts, and which tend to be stylistically less complex than other works.

In addition to selecting literary texts that are stylistically uncomplicated, it is important to select themes with which the students can identify. It is also important that the texts be culturally accessible to the students without going into too much detailed background presentation.

It also goes without saying that it is highly desirable that the chosen text should be enjoyable and entertaining to the majority of the class. Too often texts are chosen based solely on the teacher's tastes which often creates a vast gap between student

interest and the work being read in class.

Thus, the teacher should give careful thought to what works might be deemed appropriate for their class. The selection of such materials will take time and can only prove ultimately successful after being used in class and after much trial and error a list of appropriate works can gradually be compiled.

### What Types of Literature Are Best Taught ?

It is quite a popular custom in Japan, as well as in other countries, to utilize extracts from works of prose literature in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language at both the intermediate and advanced levels. Such extracts are frequently used for reading and listening comprehension exercises, as passages for translation and also as points of departure for broader discussions on literature.

This popular custom has helped to foster the development of a wealth of text books and materials which are now on the market for the teaching of English literature. One reason for the popularity of using such extracts seems to rest most strongly with the widely held belief that by using selected passages taken from famous authors, preferably Noble Prize laureates, the teacher will be better able to acquaint learners with the 'best to offer' in terms of existing English literature and hopefully thereby encourage the students to later go further on their own and possibly finish some of the works which were partially covered during the course.

Unfortunately, due to the necessity of time constrictions and convenience, literary extracts normally consist of a mere two or three pages gleaned from such long works as *Tale of Two Cities* by Dickens or *The Deerslayer* by Cooper. These passages are most often taken from the middle of the work and isolated for the purpose of more convenient presentation and coverage in class. Ironically, it is often true that the supposed excellence of the work is based not on the extract itself, but on that which has come both before and after it in the work as a whole. In addition, many of the passages have been selected, not for their inherent superiority of style at all, but instead for the far less esthetic reason that the passage just happened to be the least obscure and the most accessible one for intermediate non-native English speakers.

Taking the above information into account, it is believed that the use of such passages will do little to enhance EFL students' ability to appreciate literature and may, on the contrary, only lead to further alienation of the students towards literature by constantly presenting them with highly varied styles and literary techniques to which they are never given any opportunity to get used to. Thus, such a reading course often leads the students to frustration after frustration instead of gradually building their confidence as should be the goal of any serious literature course. It is also considerably more difficult for the students to respond to the text in a more personal manner because the reader generally has no idea what has happened previous

to the passage in question and will not get the opportunity to see how things will later develop. This prevents students from ever becoming attached to a text, which is so essential in understanding literature. Such isolated readings also greatly limit the potential for discussion and theme expansion on the part of the teacher when progressing to the oral practice portion of the class. Therefore, it is felt that the utilization of short novels or short prose works provide students with a far more unified approach to literature which enables the reader to slowly acclimate himself to the style and language usage of one particular author. In this way, as the story progresses, the student's ability to comprehend and make inferences from context grows and eventually helps to significantly increase the student's reading confidence.

Novels are, of course, the most complete and comprehensive examples of pure literature and probably provide the best opportunity for students to truly understand literature. Since novels are often prohibitively long, it is just not possible to cover all the material in class. Thus, reading a novel should be a combination of classroom work and substantial private reading on the part of the student at home. It is not necessary to read the entire work together in class, line by line. If the teacher works with the class on carefully chosen selections from a novel, he can help keep the students moving ahead while giving the students a sense of responsibility and the ultimate feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction when they finally are able to complete an entire novel.

The teacher should encourage the students not to be afraid to read the homework sections on their own by providing students with reading aids or worksheets containing clarifications on particular points of difficulty or explanations of any complications in the plot development. Difficult lexical items can often be noted as necessary. The teacher needs, however, to continuously connect the home readings with the progressing work done in class in order to provide the students with a strong sense of continuity.

Teachers should keep in mind that one of the aims of teaching English literature to non-natives is to always encourage them to feel that they can indeed read and enjoy books on their own. If a teacher can be successful in this last area, then such a course will have truly benefited the students and may influence their lives long after they finish their university studies.

Enjoyable collections of short stories, which are so abundantly available in Japan, often provide the most teachable selections of prose at the instructor's disposal, especially to general education university students in a thirteen week, one semester reading course. The fact that each work can be presented within one or two classes, depending on the length and difficulty of the work, is also both rewarding and highly motivating for the students. In addition, the majority of short story editions available in Japan are excellently annotated with lexical, cultural, historical and biographical information carefully organized in the back of the book to greatly facilitate reading

and frequently make dependence on dictionaries unnecessary. Typical popular texts containing from ten to twelve short prose selections written by various established authors can also better satisfy a large class of students with a possible wide variation of tastes in order to better please almost everyone at some time throughout the course.

Some plays can also be effectively handled in class, yet, they often lack the contemplative narrative insight that novels and short prose offer. However, drama lends itself much better to role playing on the students' part. Older works utilizing antiquated vocabulary, such as often found in Shakespeare, might be better left to the English majors but even a work like *Romeo and Juliet*, when combined with a showing of the movie version, can often be made to come alive for non-English majors. The most workable plays tend to be those that are simply written with clear dialogue and which deal with universal human themes.

Finally, the teaching of poetry, while presenting other linguistic difficulties, can also offer an enjoyable and creative change of pace in a course. The selection of poetic works, however, requires even more discriminatory selection on the part of the teacher to insure that the text is comprehensible on the part of the students. Much recent poetry that is clearly and unambiguously written in addition to lacking in any abstract obscurity, such as the style frequently found in many of Robert Frost's works, can be used very successfully in class.

A literature teacher can effectively conduct a class while relying on a syllabus of one literary genre or combining prose, drama and poetry in a kind of omnibus course, with all being successfully taught as long as the selections are found to be interesting and enjoyable to read on the part of the students.

### **Methodology in the Classroom**

After finally selecting a novel, short story or play to be studied, the teacher must then decide how to deal with it in the classroom. As stated earlier, the traditional methodology used in Japan frequently fails due to its insistence of merely imparting information to the students by means of translation or a careful explanation of the story's accepted meaning. The object of this study, however, is to explore some of the ways in which the literature teacher can maintain their students' interest while at the same time stimulating their desire to read and encouraging the students own responses to the literary work being studied.

One of the most basic and important goals of the literature teacher, which is the most flagrantly ignored by Japanese university teachers, is to maintain student interest. This can be accomplished by devising numerous student centered activities such as role play, discussions, creative writing assignments and parodies of certain characters found in the text. It is also especially important to develop an assortment of enjoyable student-centered activities when teaching students in the general education

college who are not literature majors and usually have little desire to read literature in the first place, be it in English or Japanese. Such varied activities also allow the teacher to combine the teaching of literature while improving the students skills in other areas such as speaking listening and writing.

Extensive utilization of pair and group work (up to 4 or 5 students per group) provides ideal opportunities for the students to take a more active role in the analysis of a story as well as helping to increase their confidence in using English as a means of communication. Other group members can fill in a reader who may have not clearly understood the previous reading assignment and thereby encourage such students to reread a text in order to better comprehend their classmates opinions as well as formulate their own interpretations.

It is also of great importance to use activities which continually encourage students to develop, express and value their own interpretations and responses to literature. Students should never be made to feel that because they may lack a broad, well-balanced training in the finer points of literature that their opinions or feelings toward a literary work are not worthy of consideration. If the teacher continually asks students to record their own responses to passages and to compare them with other students, then they will begin to feel much more personally involved with the reading process and become more motivated when doing their reading assignments at home.

As has already been well established, Japanese EFL teachers hardly ever use the target language when teaching and this is even more pronounced in the teaching of literature. On the other hand, when a native English speaker teaches literature, it is natural to use English not only in the presentation of the text but in the class discussions and short written assignments as well. The tiring practice of translation is not considered and students start to look at the text much in the same way as a native would. Even though the students will be greatly limited in their modes of expression when discussing the story, they should be strongly encouraged to respond in a simplified way until they can gradually start to produce more complex thoughts in the target language.

Therefore, the primary methodological strategy in the teaching of literature in Japan should begin to move in the direction of providing a fertile environment for the students to integrate listening, communicative and creative activities in combination with the study of literature. It is the literature teacher's responsibility to provide a more balanced type of language study in which students can make progress in a wide range of areas relating to their language skills.

### **Conclusion**

Literature does indeed still have a place in the modern EFL curriculum. For

many students, literature can provide a key to motivating them to read more in the target language. For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing various cultural assumptions. A teacher's success in using literature, of course, greatly depends upon the selection of a text which will not be too difficult on either a linguistic or a conceptual level. Ultimately, however, if we wish to promote truly esthetic reading, it is essential that literature be approached in a manner which establishes a personal and esthetic interaction between the reader and the text. It is simply not productive, from a truly educational standpoint, to have long teacher-controlled presentations 'about literature' to non-native general education students at Japanese universities. We English literature teachers must begin to show more respect for the students' own interpretative powers. Therefore, it is high time that we teachers throw the literary gauntlet to the students and let them run with it as they may. For it should be our goal as literature teachers to set the stage by providing them with the linguistic tools and skills they need while allowing them to fly free like birds to discover and explore the hidden beauty that waits for them in the creative and artistic world of literature.

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