

**READING EARLY MODERN POETRY IN UNIVERSITY CLASSROOMS:
FOCUSING ON STUDENTS' REAL-LIFE AND ACTIVE LEARNING**

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ABSTRACT: *The purpose of this paper is to reconsider reading classical Literature in university classrooms. Literature has been considered unsuitable for teaching and learning English language, due to its syntactic and lexical difficulty and its old and outdated vocabulary not practiced in today's English. Although many educators have realized that literature could provide the pleasure of learning a new language through interesting stories and poems, one of the main concerns in language learning classrooms is said to be the lack of authenticity of teaching materials, which can put students at a disadvantage when faced with real-world situations. This paper focuses on reading classical early modern poetry which seems to be outdated for the learners, considering how to connect it with the learners' real-world situations in the classroom.*

KEYWORDS: literature for EFL/ESL, real-world situation, transformative competence, emotional intelligence, active learning

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) summarized the Education 2030 framework, which outlines what appropriate education should be comprised of by 2030. The OECD regards acquiring “transformative competence” as the learning framework by 2030 (OECD, 2018, 6). We are facing unprecedented challenges driven by accelerating globalization and a faster rate of technological developments. Especially in Japan, due to the decline in population, students should acquire a Humanity Quotient (HQ) rather than an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) to be compatible with the artificial intelligence (AI) society.

This paper will discuss English literature education in university classrooms, especially the reading of English classical poems; examine the brief history of English language education using literature; and suggest how students can effectively achieve transformative competence as well as HQ.

A Brief History of Literature-Based Education—World and Japan

English literature as a subject in foreign language curricula, dates to the early 19th century in India and other British colonies—initially, as a part of the colonial project. Literature was used to provide modern knowledge, and as moral and religious training for Indians. Literature gradually crept into English language education, particularly for the middle classes, to serve a

useful moral agenda. From the late 19th century, Literature was central to the study of English in Britain, its colonies, and other foreign countries.

In the early 20th century, the grammar translation method (GTM) and the direct method became the dominant methodologies for teaching literature in foreign language education. Literature became a tool for teaching reading comprehension, with prestigious texts taught primarily to elite students in higher-level classes. In the mid-20th century, the focus of language teaching subtly began to change. Educators became more concerned with developing students' abilities to communicate. This was the beginning of the decline of the use of literature in foreign language study. Moving from the 1950s to the 1970s, two different streams of literature emerged.

First, literature was considered irrelevant and was dismissed from foreign language education. According to Ilyas, "One of the widely neglected issued in ELT (the term ELT here refers to EFL, ESL, TEFL and TESOL) is literature" (Ilyas, 2016, 1). The professors of literature in universities tend to use the lecture method. "Hence, many university students depend only on critical notes provided by their professors rather than reading the authentic literary text. As a result, literature learning becomes uninteresting" (Magulod, 2018, 2).

Second, as the teaching style shifted from lecture-based GTM to the communicative language teaching approach (CLT), literature was revived in language teaching education, because many educators realized that it is full of examples of functional languages in various situations. Arafah pointed out two important things in the teachers' perception of CLT that "the first is the use of functional language, and the second is the use of authentic materials as a way to expose the language which is used in real life situations..." (Arafah, 2018, 25). As Armstrong mentioned, "the 1980s in particular, saw a resurgence of literature being used as the source material for language learning" (Armstrong, 2015, 7).

In the case of Japan, English became a compulsory part of education in 1947, and English instruction became exam oriented. This provoked a heated controversy, known as the "Hiraizumi-Watanabe Debate" over whether English should be mandatory. This debate gradually developed into an argument about promoting English education based on liberal arts versus communication-focused education. The business sector has consistently demanded that schoolteachers speak and teach communicative English. This requires a way to measure English communication skills. So, in 1979, the US-based Educational Testing Service (ETS) created the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC).

After official Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) curricula guidelines were revised in 1989, the goals of foreign language education changed drastically; the new aim of teaching English became to develop students' ability to communicate. This was the first time the word "communication" appeared in official guidelines in the history of English education in Japan.

Focusing on the Students' Real-World Situations

There is a famous film, "Dead Poets Society," set in 1959 in an elite conservative boarding school, Welton Academy. It tells the story of an English teacher who inspires his students

through teaching poetry. On the first day of classes, the new English teacher, John Keating, asks one of his students, Gerard Pitts, to read a poem, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time,” (1648) by 17th century poet, Robert Herrick (1591-1674). The following is the first stanza.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,

Old Time is still a flying:

And this same flower that smiles today

To-morrow will be dying. (cited from Kleinbaum, 1993, 25)

This poem is supposed to address virgins, saying “enjoy the pleasures of youth while you can, because they are quickly passing.” But Keating brings this old poem closer to his students’ world, summarizing it with the Latin expression *carpe diem*, meaning “seize the day.”

He quotes the first line, “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.” Generally, roses bloom in early summer, so rosebuds are only available for a few days. We have a limited time to “gather rosebuds.” When Keating asks, “Why does the writer use these lines?” he answers himself, “Because we are food for worms” (Kleinbaum, 1993, 25). We all die. “Seize the day, while you can, and make your life extraordinary” is Keating’s message to his elite students who simply follow their parents’ ambitions.

When you explain the meaning of the poem in your own classroom, you could also reference the authentic literary translation such as the personified “Old Time.” Old Time is usually described as a male figure, holding a scythe—a large hooked blade—in one hand and an hourglass in the other. The hourglass symbolizes finite time and the scythe is used during harvest for gathering crops. Thus, Old Time often symbolizes the god of death.

Another film featuring an English teacher is “Renaissance Man,” a 1994 comedy-drama film starring Danny DeVito as Bill Rago. He is an English teacher for students at a US army training base. Unlike those in “Dead Poets Society,” his students are not from elite backgrounds, but one day Rago unexpectedly starts teaching them Hamlet, a famous tragedy by William Shakespeare. Of course, they are not familiar with it. The class seems impossible to teach.

However, when Rago explains that Hamlet is about sex, murder, incest, and insanity, the students become motivated and inspired because those key words somehow relate to their own real-life situations.

In the play, Hamlet blames his mother because she married his father’s brother, Claudius, so soon after his father’s sudden death. This is the incest part in the play, romantic relationships between a wife and a brother-in-law were prohibited in those days and is still considered taboo. In effect, upon marriage, the husband’s brother became the brother of the wife, and this relationship survived the death of the husband.

The events or accidents in the play act in unison with the experiences and situations of Rago’s students. For example, Melvin identifies with Hamlet due to his own experiences with his

mother. Miranda Myers also identifies Hamlet's mother with hers because Miranda's mother ran away with her new boyfriend and left her behind. As for Donnie Benitez, his sister was killed by a stray bullet. The students become fully engrossed in the world of Hamlet; it speaks to their own experiences. For them, reading Hamlet come close to their own real-life situations.

Active Reading Literature in the Classroom

Based on McKay (1982)'s enumeration, Bagherkazemi and Alemi found three of the most common counterarguments regarding using literature in the language classroom as follows:

1. Literature's structural complexity, and unique and sometimes nonstandard use of language preclude the teaching of grammar which is one of the main goals of language teachers.
2. Literature has nothing to offer to EAP (English for Academic Purposes) and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) courses where the focus is on meeting the students' academic and professional goals.
3. Literature is highly culturally charged, hence its conceptual difficulty and its hindrance, rather than facilitation, of learning the target language. (Bagherkazemi and Alemi, 2010, 1-2)

Bagherkazemi and Alemi attribute language teachers' reluctance to employ poetic language to literature's detachment from the readers' immediate social context. However, understanding older poetic language could trigger students' motivation and positive engagement. For example, going back to the film "Renaissance Man," when the English teacher Rago reads Shakespeare's Hamlet, he tries to engage his students. He reads Act 1, Scene 2, where Hamlet's mother Gertrude is not only encouraging Hamlet to accept the death of his father, the former king, but also to accept that Claudius is now the king.

GERTRUDE: Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off,

And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark.

Do not forever with thy vailèd lids

Seek for thy noble father in the dust. (Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 70-73)

When a student does not understand "cast thy nighted color off," Rago asks him "What color do we wear at a funeral?" The student answers "black." And Rago echoes him, "black!" and says "a nighted color," and then explains the meaning of the whole sentence that his mother is telling him not to wear black, to stop mourning. Rago used this procedure to make sense of words from context. As the class progresses, the students gain the self-confidence they need to make it through basic training, became eager to learn, and change their previous views of the subject matter. Here, they did "find and recreate within themselves the main feelings of the poem they read" (Preston, 1982, 489).

When we interpret literature, we reconstruct the text. As Magulod states, "Literary appreciation is the process by which one gauges one's interpretive response as a reader to a literary work"

(Magulod, 2018, 2). Thus, the process is important. “Literary texts are intellectually stimulating,” Shazu mentions, “they allow readers to create worlds with which they may not be familiar and the way they do it is by relying on language” (Shazu, 2014, 62). When the students build meaning, they reconstruct and recreate what they think the writer or poet is trying to communicate.

Reading poetry in classrooms can be amazingly effective for university students. They can read short poems with the teachers’ help, individually, or in pairs and groups, thus engaging in active learning. We as teachers help by interpreting and simplifying literary terms or clues into language that the students can easily understand, and by revealing the real-life essence of literature, however old or outdated it may seem.

Reading Literature to Acquire “Transformative Competence”

When Education 2030 was announced, the OECD stated that the younger generation needs to acquire “Transformative Competence” to survive this world. This consists of three categories: creating new value, reconciling tensions and dilemmas, and taking responsibility (OECD, 2018, 5). I think literature covers all of these.

In terms of creating value, the OECD mentioned that “people should be able to think creatively, develop new products and services, new jobs, new processes and methods, new ways of thinking and living” (OECD, 2018, 5) to prepare for 2030. Cooperation and collaboration with others draw on existing knowledge to create new knowledge. Reading literature helps students understand diversity of thought—that there are many different people and opinions across the world.

In terms of reconciling tension and dilemmas, the OECD mentioned “individuals have to learn to think and act in a more integrated way, taking into account the interconnections and interrelations between contradictory or incompatible ideas” (OECD, 2018, 5). Reading literature fosters personal involvement in readers. It can be understood as “the readers’ close contact with the characters or the engagement in the event of the story, the sharing of emotions and feelings between readers and characters, between readers and the author, and among readers themselves” (Shazu, 2014, 63). Therefore, students would improve their language awareness and cultural understanding through reading literary texts in pairs or groups in the classroom.

Finally, regarding taking responsibility, the OECD said, “Central to this competency is the concept of self-regulation, which involves self-control, self-efficacy, responsibility, problem solving and adaptability” (OECD, 2018, 6). This competence is prerequisite for the other two.

Reading literature fosters the development of emotional intelligence (EQ) defined by Daniel Goleman (1995), “which is essential for empathy and tolerance” (Ghosn, 2002, 177). Goleman believes that IQ and even multiple intelligences did not cater to this aspect of human intelligence. EQ is specifically related to the human ability to control and manage their emotions and feelings in difficult situations. Because it deals with affection, feelings, and emotions, “Literature is a good source for nurturing our EQ” (Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan, 2011, 203).

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the reading of classical English literature in university classrooms. Students' motivation in the learning process is often determined by their "interest" in (Crookes and Schmidt, 1991, 287) and enthusiasm for the material used in the class (Van, 2009, 9).

As Khatib suggests, "we can use literature as a motivating tool for instigating the learners to explore different text types" (Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan, 2011, 204). Referring to Maley's (1989) approaches to teaching literature, they show five methodological approaches to teaching literature. One of them is called "Literature as Personal Growth or Enrichment." (Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan, 2011, 205). They point out that in this approach personal experience is capitalized upon as a way to engage the students in literary works. They add that here the learners "cherish the literary experience which is associated with the learners' own real-life experience" (Khatib, Rezaei and Derakhshan, 2011, 205).

The authors of the present paper believe that literature, despite some drawbacks, might provide a motivating drive for language learning and teaching and can become a life-long skill through reading appropriate literary texts and reading experience.

Note:

1 This paper is a revised version of my oral presentation at the symposium of the 22nd Annual Conference, which was held on 13th September, 2019, in Chuo Gakuin University in Japan and was sponsored by The Japan Society for Culture in English.

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