Communicative Approaches to Using Literature in the English Language Class

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Not too long ago, English language instructors would comment that although many Japanese university students did not have good oral communication skills, students were able to read and write English quite adequately. This was attributed to students' prior English learning experiences in classes at the secondary level where emphasis was placed on reading, translating and analyzing the language rather than on its communicative use. This meant that while students had less trouble reading and comprehending the text, they could be "excused" for not being able to transfer this understanding to skills related to spoken English. For this reason, Japanese university students were called "false beginners" and the challenge for the EFL teacher was to somehow incorporate communicative tasks into classroom procedures which would motivate these shy and passive students, who *did* have passable English reading and writing skills, to be more productive in the oral sphere.

Times have changed. More and more teachers are discovering that many students today have trouble reading and comprehending the English in some of the simplest passages of an assigned text. For some reason, in classes at junior and senior high schools, many students have not mastered the essentials of English grammar or vocabulary. Teachers are surprised that texts selected for a particular class, which may have worked well in previous years, are too difficult for students today.

There is probably no single cause for this apparent decline in students' English proficiency. Some point to the fact that with the shortening of the school week – public schools no longer have classes on Saturday – instructional hours in all subjects have been reduced. This, naturally, applies to English language classes as well. Other teachers have noted that with increasing awareness of communicative language teaching, with many native-speaker ALTs coming sporadically into classes with fun,

communicative language games, there is less class time for students to spend on the nitty-gritty aspects of mastering basic English grammar structures, vocabulary, and spelling – skills needed in reading and writing.

Other teachers, both Japanese and non-Japanese, observe that since this younger generation does not read or write adequately in their mother-tongue, how can they be expected to do so in English? In today's world young people are easily entertained by mass media – TV, videos, karaoke, pop music, video games, the ever present mobile phones, and access to the Internet. It is rare these days to find students who say that they enjoy reading in their spare time – and if they do read, they usually mean that they are reading comics which may offer a trendy and interesting view on current society, but don't require the extensive reading of prose. The convenience of cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, and word processing have seemingly diminished the importance of writing skills as well.

It is not within the scope of this paper to investigate the causes of this perceived decline in students' English language proficiency. However, these concerns do present a dilemma for university teachers – for those who teach English and American literature, as well as for those who teach in the EFL class. We, as educators, need to adjust to these changes in the student population. How can we select texts and reading materials that are more appropriate and motivating for students today? And, in this context, is literature an important subject to teach? If so – and many teachers would emphatically agree – what are effective ways to use literature in a learner-centered approach in the EFL class in the Japanese educational environment at the tertiary level.

The aim of this paper is to re-examine the role of literature in the language class; to look once again at some different theories and approaches from both the literature as a subject perspective, as well as the EFL perspective. Although American and English literature has been taught at Japanese universities for many years, perhaps it is time to reconsider classroom approaches to literature, not only when taught as a content course, but also when used as a resource for language acquisition in the EFL class.

Does literature have a role in the English language class? Opinions seem to be divided about this question. Some EFL teachers may consider literature to be irrelevant in the language class because literary works are not practical

enough; it does not relate to everyday experiences and the language introduced may not represent a good example of "normal" English usage. On the other hand, teachers of literature may argue that the use of literature in the language class trivializes the weighty, universal themes of great literary works by reducing them to mere language exercises. These teachers feel that students cannot gain 'literary competence' if literature is used simply as a resource for language learning.

Another issue to consider here is that in recent years many teachers are voicing their dissatisfaction with functional/notional classroom texts that are based on role plays and drills related to bland topics such as shopping, asking directions, weekend activities, hobbies and home-stays (Small, 2003, p.10). The language introduced in these kind of texts is often piecemeal, and the shallow topics do not engage students on a personal, meaningful level. Many teachers feel that it is hard to sustain the interest of students who may have used this kind of text year after year, with little to show in terms of gains in language proficiency.

As a means of shifting the focus away from shallow topics and the mechanical aspects of language learning, language teachers are now putting a great deal of thought into content-based curricula with a focus on helping students become responsible global citizens. In recent years there have been conferences, workshops and many articles devoted to content-based classes related to a range of contemporary global concerns. Through the Internet teachers and students have access to an overwhelming amount of information, not only related to global issues but also to charity sites (Summerville, 2003, p. 35). We now see texts which feature a broader range of thought provoking themes related to global issues, such as peace studies, gender, HIV/AIDS, fair trade, human rights, and environmental problems.

This new direction in these publications is a welcome change. However there has been criticism directed toward English courses designed around activities related to controversial global and potentially taboo social issues. Some argue that the teaching of these courses may display teacher biases and come across as a way of indoctrinating students to a particular view (Sargent, 2004, p.9). Clearly, the introduction of such topics needs to be handled very carefully by conscientious and culturally sensitive instructors. If instructors somehow indicate that there is a "correct" opinion related to a

particular social issue, this kind of classroom environment will not really allow students to come to their own conclusions and express their own ideas freely. If a teacher has an overt missionary-style agenda when introducing a particular political or social topic, it may become difficult for students to do their own critical thinking and opinion forming. This can have a negative impact on class dynamics and the language learning process as a whole (Guest, 2004 p. 14).

Another concern that I have heard teachers in Japan express is that for students at the beginner level, when the content of the course focuses on global issues, it becomes difficult for class work to stay in the target language, English. In order to discuss more serious social issues, students must do background research and come to informed opinions. Students need to gather information which may require the comprehension of rather specialized vocabulary. For beginner students it is infinitely easier to resort to Japanese language when reading research materials, doing 'field work' outside of class, and exchanging ideas in class. Teachers have noted that "students become eagerly involved in the topic and tend to express their ideas in their native language. They are stimulated beyond their proficiency level in English: their language ability cannot keep pace with the flow of ideas" (Cooney, 2003, p.7) .

My experience has been that once Japanese language becomes an accepted medium of communication in the English class, it is extremely difficult for students to return to the use of English. The use of Japanese in English class becomes a habit. In the class environment it is natural for students to feel more comfortable conforming to whatever the group is doing. If the majority of the group is using Japanese in class, the student who wants to keep in an "English mode" may appear to be a show-off and has a hard time going against the crowd.

It is immensely gratifying to observe students actively involved in discussing meaningful topics that are important to them as they become part of the global community. However, as English language teachers it is also important for us to encourage and urge students to use English – to create a class environment that supports the English language learning process. If too much class time is spent on activities in Japanese, we are depriving students – many of whom have very little chance to use English outside of

class – of opportunities to practice, develop fluency and gain confidence in using English. In course-end evaluations some students have mentioned that they were disappointed that so much class time was spent discussing in Japanese. They were saddened that they had not been more motivated to use English; they wanted the instructor to be stricter about enforcing the use of English in class.

This is not to suggest that global issues should be abandoned in the language class; global education has an important role in inspiring students to become aware and responsible members of society (Peaty, 2004, p.17). However, when including global issues as a part of the English language curriculum, teachers need to carefully introduce and practice relevant vocabulary and terms. If the topic is controversial, students should be encouraged to explore all sides of the issue, not just one view. To promote student autonomy, class members can be involved in deciding what topics on which to focus; students need to have some choice in selecting which global issues are meaningful to them.

Teachers also need to observe and interact with discussion groups in order to help students in the process of expressing themselves, as they collaborate in gathering different opinions, clarifying meanings, and thereby communicating effectively with others in English. This process requires practice and necessitates a classroom atmosphere that supports the use of English. With regular practice students can gain confidence in their abilities to communicate effectively about topics which are not included in 'daily conversation'. My observation has been that student motivation is influenced by this feeling of success in communication.

Literary works can also touch upon a wide range of meaningful topics such as identity, alienation, cultural clashes and generational conflicts. However, if literary materials are selected carefully, with the learners' backgrounds and interests in mind, there is little danger of students feeling that the focus of the course is to convert them to a particular point of view. Because literary works center around enduring and essential human issues, and because they are authentic – they have not been created around a specific social agenda or language teaching purpose – students are able to engage imaginatively with the text (Collie & Slater, 1987, p.5). If efforts are made to design a variety of classroom activities that students will be

motivated to engage in, it is possible to create a class environment where students stay in "English mode" and are delighted to be able to do so. This enthusiasm for English can be contagious and spill over into outside class interactions among students.

It is helpful, then, to re-think what it is that we mean by literature. Although literature has been an important subject of study at the secondary and tertiary level throughout the world, scholars have had great difficulty in defining not only what they mean by "literature" but also in defining what the goals for teaching literature should be. In years past, literature was generally defined in terms of the acknowledged "great classics" in the English and American literary tradition – works which tended to have a white, male Eurocentric bias. In more recent years, educators and scholars concur that literature, as well as culture, cannot be defined so narrowly. The value of diversity is now appreciated; there is recognition of the significance of multi-cultural literature, world literature, mythologies from other parts of the world, as well as works from popular culture (Simonson & Walker, 1988).

Objectives for teaching literature have also have also changed. In the past, many educators felt that the role of literature was to help individuals become better humans and citizens. Some scholars in the 19th century argued that the purpose of literature was to "moralize, civilize and humanize" (Showalter, p.22). In the United States, following the Civil War, however, many felt that the goal for teaching literature was to provide a sense of culture and tradition for the nation. In the early years of the 20th century the purpose of teaching literature was to encourage Christian values and religious guidance. Later, in the 1960s and 1970s the teaching of literature was viewed as a political process focusing on the consciousness-raising of different minority groups (Showalter, p.23).

Recent trends in literary criticism have moved away from worrying about definitions and objectives for teaching literature and have focused more on pedagogy. Many university teachers of literature are now focusing more on *how* they are teaching rather than *what* they are teaching. While educators may continue to debate student objectives and teacher expectations in the literature class, there is increasing realization that literature must be taught more from the student's perspective rather than the teacher's (Showalter, p.24).

In the EFL field there has long been a concern for teaching pedagogy; countless books and articles have weighed the pros and cons of various teaching methodologies and language learning processes. In recent years, in getting away from the 'method' approach, there has been greater focus on more of a bottom-up approach and efforts to identify effective teaching from the classroom itself (Nunan, 1989, p.144). Another trend has called attention to the importance of learner-centered approaches which involves using knowledge about the learner in developing classroom curriculum (Nunan, 1989, p.144). It is through these approaches – bottom-up and learner-centered – that literature can be a stimulating part of the English language learning process.

The study of English and American literature has long been a standard part of course work for English majors in Japan. Generally students take introductory courses to English and American literature, and then continue on in seminar-style classes which focus on specific authors and genres. Although teaching approaches have changed recently, it was not too long ago that a literature class at a Japanese university was, in essence, a translation class. Professors typically would select a novel or other work in their specialized area and this would be the content of the course for that academic year. Class work inevitably consisted of line-by-line analysis and explanation of the literary text, with students playing a passive role as they dutifully took notes as professors expounded on their literary knowledge and their impressive comprehension of complex English structures.

In many cases this process was so time consuming that only a small portion of the assigned literary work could be covered in a course. If one asked students about what they thought of a particular writer or novel just studied, the student would have very little to say; students seemed unaware that the literary selection might have some connection to their own lives. Needless to say, many students - even those highly motivated and with greater language proficiency - found the process of reading literary works excruciatingly boring and ended up disliking literature and reading English materials altogether. Unfortunately, this approach to teaching literature did very little to improve the language proficiency of the typical student, nor was it an effective way for students to learn much about aspects of literature, to gain any cultural insights or make any personal connection to the themes

introduced in the literary works.

Since the 1980s a number of educators in the EFL field have shown a greater interest in how literature can be used as a resource for language acquisition and a number useful guides have been published. In *Literature and Language Teaching* (Cambridge, 1993) Gillian Lazar suggests some of the following reasons for using literature in the language class.

> Literature is motivating. In many cultures the study of literature is highly valued, thus students of English can have a sense of achievement in looking at complex themes and important life issues in the context of literary works in their target language (Lazar, p.15).

> Literature provides access to cultural background. Literature can offer insights into the culture of the writer, as well as how that writer views the world. By looking at other cultures, the learner can also become more aware of his or her own cultural heritage (Lazar, p.16).

> Literature encourages language acquisition. Literary works can stimulate the learning process because it offers meaningful and memorable contexts for processing and interpreting the target language. Through classroom discussions and group work students can exchange ideas and share feelings about meaningful topics. In many cases this process of learning is an unconscious one and this is particularly valuable for students who have few opportunities to use English outside the language class (Lazar, p.17).

> Literature expands the student's language awareness. Because the language of literature is often different than normal discourse, learners can see how English is used in imaginative, unconventional ways (Lazar, p.18).

> Literature develops the learner's interpretive abilities. Through literature, the learner can be encouraged to make inferences, understand multiple levels of meaning, develop skills in critical thinking as well as learn to accept ambiguities in the text. By exchanging and comparing ideas students can come to the realization that in many cases there is no single "correct" way to interpret a particular text (Lazar, p.19).

> Literature educates the whole person. Literature can stimulate the learner's imagination, help develop critical skills and expand emotional awareness. Responding to literary texts on a personal level can help learners gain confidence in expressing their ideas and emotions in English. These activities can also encourage learners to relate these themes to the values and traditions of their own culture (Lazar, p.19).

Other authors suggest that the teaching of literature should be a part of a complete language learning experience. In the language class, rather than focusing on understanding the text, approaches to literature should view the learner as an important resource. Experiences of the learner can provide an important background from which to explore literary works, and teaching approaches to literature should be more communicative, learner-centered and foster collaborative work (Bassnett & Grundy, p.1).

For teachers of literature, Showalter identifies three broad approaches or theories. These are the subject-centered approach, the teacher-centered approach, and the student-centered approach. The subject, or content, centered theory stresses teaching literature from a particular political agenda or intellectual conviction. The teacher-centered approach sees the teaching act as either a performance, or as a way of highlighting the teacher's own spiritual journey. The student-centered approach, influenced by research into learning styles, stresses the importance of the student's active involvement in the learning process rather than that of the teacher (Showalter, 2003).

In the student-centered approach, learning is a two-way, collaborative process as advocated by educators such as John Dewey and Paolo Freire (Showalter, p. 36). Student-centered teaching is also facilitated by Parker J. Palmer's idea of "teaching from the microcosm" (Showalter, p.36); in teaching literature this may mean looking at literature from small, significant passages of a piece, rather than attempting to cover the entire work. Showalter notes that most teachers, who want to maintain a student-centered focus, will adapt an eclectic approach based on observation of student needs (Showalter, p.38). Interestingly, she also notes that although all teachers have a teaching persona, "which may be an exaggeration or an evasion"

(Showalter, p. 38) of the teacher's private self; whatever that persona may be, the most effective educators are those whose ideas related to literary theory correlate closely to their teaching theory and practice (Showalter, p.39).

In many ways, the teaching approaches for literature as a subject, as discussed by Showalter, correspond to the approaches that EFL teachers may consider for using literature as a resource for language acquisition. Lazar examines the advantages and disadvantages of three common approaches used in the EFL class; the language based approach, the literature as content approach and the literature for personal enrichment approach (Lazar, 1993).

The language-based approach is where, in order improve their general awareness of English, students pay attention to the way language is used in a text. Learners make use of their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and concentrate on stylistic analysis. While this approach can include some learner-centered activities, it is fairly rigid and not much attention is paid to the historical and cultural background of a text, nor are students encouraged to interact on a personal level, with the themes and topics of a text (Lazar, 1993).

The literature as content approach, perhaps the most commonly used approach in traditional literature classes, focuses on the historical, social and cultural background of a work. In this case, for the EFL learner, literature may be used as a source of information about the target culture. Students read through assigned texts and related literary criticism; the main objective is to provide students with 'literary competence'. This approach is generally teacher-centered and students often resort to using their mother-tongue in discussion and in translation of the text (Lazar, 1993).

The literature for personal enrichment approach, which is more process-oriented and learner-centered, views the reading of literature as a way for students to consider their own experiences, feelings and opinions. The aim is for students to interact with the text, with others in the class, and through the literary selections, come to a deeper emotional and intellectual understanding of themselves and their own culture. In this approach, through well-planned tasks, active use of the target language is encouraged; through this process literary works are demystified and made more approachable. The challenge in using this approach is in the selection of appropriate texts,

in terms of content as well as level. Some learners may also feel uncomfortable or be unfamiliar with this approach to language learning where personal responses and sharing of opinions are an important component of the course (Lazar, 1993).

Others have noted the impact that process-based teaching has on teaching approaches to literature: (a) EFL strategies, such as role-play, cloze, and prediction, will be adapted for use in teaching literary materials; (b) in order to encourage student response, literary texts may be manipulated to motivate student response; (c) in contrast to teacher-centered classes, the focus is on language-based, student-centered activities which engage the student with the text; (d) the communication between the teacher and the student is no longer one-way and collaborative learning processes will encourage students to rely less on the teacher as the basis of knowledge (Carter & McRae, 1996, p.xxii).

Suggestions for Classes in Japanese Universities

In the general field of EFL there is now an awareness that there is no single correct or most effective approach, or method, concerning language acquisition and classroom procedures. Instead, attention has been given to identifying what is effective classroom teaching by observing what is happening in the classroom itself (Nunan, p.144). For the teacher using literary works as a resource of language acquisition, this bottom-up, or classroom-oriented approach, can hopefully lead to designing activities that will engage learners in the process of language learning – activities which may combine features of various approaches such as the 'natural approach', with the 'community language learning' approach and the 'communicative approach'. This, in many ways, echoes Showalter's advice in her guidebook directed toward university teachers of English and American literature.

There are a number practical guides for instructors wanting to focus on the teaching of reading skills, as well as many resource materials suggesting ways to incorporate literary works in English language classes. In the following section I would like to suggest materials and approaches which, based on my own experiences, have been especially effective in Japanese university EFL classes – classes which tend to be fairly homogeneous, where there may be a range in student English proficiency levels and where

students are often unmotivated. Most students are also unfamiliar with what it means to actively involved – through discussion and opinion sharing – in the language learning process.

Selecting material:

There are numerous questions to consider when selecting material for use in the Japanese university setting. Is the material the appropriate length? Is the topic of interest to the students and relevant to their life experiences? Will the material stimulate personal involvement and provoke the reactions of the learners? How much cultural or literary background will the learners need in order to understand and respond to the material? At what level are the students, in terms of English language proficiency? Are there international students in the class? What is the male/female proportion of the students? While it may be difficult to know the answers to these questions when planning a course, it is important for instructors to be conscious of these issues.

Rather than selecting one long work, such as a novel, I have found that shorter works, such as poems, short stories and extracts from novels, are easier to fit into the typical Japanese academic calendar. With shorter literary material a wider range of topics and language skills can be introduced; additionally, through of variety of texts, the interests, learning strategies and language proficiencies of different students can be addressed.

In order to learn more about the interests and backgrounds of a particular group of students it is useful to spend the first few class sessions learning about the interests of the students. Any number of "getting to know you" kind of activities can be used, but this step is important in helping students feel comfortable with each other and in creating a positive learning environment. For the teacher, observing students in these activities can be useful in assessing the different interests and language proficiency levels among the class members. If a course text has already been chosen, rather than going through a text sequentially, when appropriate, students themselves may want to work together in selecting units or chapters that are appealing to them.

Although this point may seem obvious, another important factor to consider when selecting texts or materials is 'difficulty', or 'level'. Selections

should be fairly accessible; reading and comprehending the material should not lead to a frustrating, time-consuming exercise which forces students to dwell on grammar/translation and excessive dictionary work. When selecting texts for study, teachers need to take into account difficulties that may arise from not only from complexity in language and vocabulary, but also from text length, cultural references and potential negative student reactions to certain kinds of materials. For these reasons, in the English language class, many language instructors recommend material by contemporary writers rather than works in the traditional 'classics' (Duff & Maley, 1996, p.8).

Writers of multi-cultural literature often deal with themes of cultural conflict, their efforts at understanding their identity, their feelings of being in-between cultures and the alienation between themselves and their parents. These are themes with which learners in the Japanese context can identify. Over the years I have found that for students at Japanese universities, works by minority writers such as Amy Tan, Sandra Cisneros, Langston Hughes, Gary Soto, Li-Young Lee, Joy Ogawa, and Dwight Okita, are in many ways more accessible and need less cultural explanation than works considered 'the classics" in the English and American literary world. The writings of Asian American writers are particularly pertinent to students in Japanese university classes because much of the imagery, and many of the cultural and social references are familiar and need little explanation.

Folktales and myths also are a valuable resource for the 'language through literature' class. The language of folktales and myths is often repetitious and simple, making these tales appropriate for classes of beginners. While fairly easy, these stories can provide insights into history, religious beliefs and social customs of a particular culture; these tales also lend themselves to a wide range of activities which foster intercultural awareness while improving the language competence of the learner (Taylor, 2000).

Although Japan has a rich tradition of folktales and mythology, many Japanese students are unaware of their own literary traditions, thus introducing tales and myths can be a way of learning about themselves and discovering aspects of their own cultural heritage. In addition, the examination of folktales and myths from different cultures can offer a spring-board for comparing cultures, archetypal themes and motifs. This

kind of comparative work is especially appealing and motivating if there are non-Japanese students in the class.

Pre-reading activities:

Most readers and texts for EFL learners include pre-reading questions. Some teachers may find these questions too time consuming and therefore choose to skip them and go right into reading the text. However, the purpose of pre-reading activities is to familiarize students with the topic and assist them in the reading task so that there is less dependence on dictionary work. If the pre-reading step is omitted, reading the text becomes more difficult and an important step in the language learning process has been overlooked.

Warm-up questions and discussion:

One useful step is to prepare a handout of some pre-reading questions for students to work on as a homework assignment. Instead of homework, in some situations the first ten or fifteen minutes of class time might be used for this step of 'thinking in English'. The questions on the handout are related to some of the themes and references in the text and are a valuable way of getting students to react to the topic and think about their own experiences. This is also a way to pre-teach important vocabulary without students being too conscious that they are being taught new words.

Students should be instructed to think about the questions and make notes of their responses so that they can actively participate in the small group discussions in the following class. It is important to stress to students that active involvement in group work is an essential part of the course. At first, students may be somewhat puzzled because these handouts are often not immediately corrected or graded. However, students soon realize that if they have not thought about the questions and are thus not ready to express their ideas in English, they have to sit through the discussion time in awkward silence, and their lack of preparation is evident to everyone.

In most cases, once students realize what is expected of them, they find this pre-reading discussion time highly motivating. They come to class eager to talk about their experiences and feelings; they enjoy exchanging ideas with their classmates. If students have adequately prepared for the discussion, they are happily surprised to realize that they are able to

communicate effectively, almost unconsciously, in English. As part of group discussion students can also learn to take notes of other students' responses and, when possible, a group leader can report back to the whole class, giving a summary of that group's discussion. This 'thinking in English' and the 'give and take' process of exchanging opinions through the discussion process is often a new experience for students who have gone through the Japanese educational system.

Reading:

In this kind of 'language through literature' class relatively less time is spent on the reading task itself, partly because the selections are shorter and also because more class time is spent in group work and discussion activities. There are a wide range of reading approaches that the teacher can select, depending on the particular group of students and the type of literary material. General reading strategies - silent reading, reading aloud, skimming, scanning, reading for general comprehension, guessing meanings of words from context, inferencing, close reading – all of these can be employed in the 'language through literature' class.

The important point here is to keep reading tasks enjoyable, to help learners notice how the writer uses literary devices, such a metaphor, alliteration, imagery or personification and to help the learner connect the themes of the readings to their own individual backgrounds. Sometimes students surprise themselves when they realize that they can identify closely with the experiences and feelings of the writer, even though the use of language in a particular passage may be unfamiliar and unlike usual textbook discourse.

Supplementing with materials from pop culture:

If literature is defined in a broad sense – fiction, non-fiction, plays, songs, films, TV programs, cartoons and magazine ads – then there are innumerable materials that can be brought in to add variety to the language class. Many teachers recognize the value of supplementing literature, such as novels, with film versions of the work, and this is true in the EFL class as well. However, if only an excerpt from a novel is being used, it may be best to spend class time showing only that portion. Rather than watching the whole

film, class time is better spent on listening comprehension tasks and speaking activities which are planned around the particular film clip. If needed, students can be encouraged to watch the whole film outside of class. With DVDs, subtitles in English can now be shown instead of the Japanese, and this can be advantageous in the language class as well.

Songs can also be brought into the class as an example of popular literature. From the lyrics of pop songs and jazz pieces students can learn many aspects of language, such as rhyme, rhythm, figures of speech and idiomatic usage. The themes of a song may relate to a subject matter in a particular literary work, or the song may be related to important cultural and social issues such as war, the environment, and problems in human relationships. Many songs, such as ballads, tell a story, and so students can examine these songs in a literary context by discussing plot, mood, setting, theme, character and climax. Approaching serious themes through the medium of pop songs is motivating for many students.

Creative Writing:

After discussing and reading a literary piece, students can be encouraged to try their hand at writing creatively about the topic, using the literary text as an example. This writing might be very short and fairly simple, such as writing a personal metaphor or simile. It could also be a poem, a haiku, or short autobiographical essay. By referring back to their notes from the pre-reading discussion questions and understanding and appreciating how a particular writer used language to convey experiences and feelings, students can more readily write poems and essays which reflect their own personal experiences and individuality in an creative way. The process of thinking, discussing, reading, and sharing ideas again, often gives students inspiration and stimulation for writing. They approach a composition assignment with ideas about what to write, as well as the language background to express themselves more easily and creatively.

Through peer editing or making class composition booklets, students have a chance to read each other's works – something most students truly enjoy. Through creative writing students gain confidence when they realize how imaginative and inventive they can be in a language not their own.

Presentations:

Student presentations are a standard component of the EFL class. For the 'language through literature' class, presentations can also motivate students to investigate stories and literature on their own. Projects, or presentations can be done as group work, or as individual work, depending on the particular mix of students. One example of these presentation projects might be one where students compare myths or folktales from different cultures—for instance they might compare creation myths from different cultures. Each person, or group, could select a tale or myth from a different country, do background research, make suitable handouts and vocabulary explanations, as well prepare visual aides for use in the presentation.

The Internet provides a wealth of information for project work and part of course work can focus on helping students learn how to make use of this material without simply cutting and pasting web pages to use as handouts. As preparation for this project work, presentation skills such as maintaining good eye contact with the audience, voice projection, gestures and effective use of visuals can also be practiced.

One problem that often arises when students are making a presentation is that the audience group is inattentive. In order to alleviate this problem it is useful to distribute presentation evaluation forms so that students can judge each other. This form might ask for the evaluation of items such as background research, use of visual aids, organization and the skills of presentation. In order to save time and simplify the judging process, the form can list the various points to be evaluated and students can circle their assessments on a numerical scale. A space at the end of the form can be left open for questions and comments. At the end of each presentation, members of the audience can be encouraged to ask questions or make comments about the presentation. Although students are often overly generous in judging each other, for the teacher, these forms can be one factor to consider when preparing student grades.

Portfolios as Assessment:

In a class where literature is being used as a means of language acquisition, instead of a formal test, the portfolio is a more holistic way of evaluating a student's involvement in class activities. At the start of a course

students are asked to prepare a loose-leaf notebook for the class which will be turned in at the end of the term. This notebook, or portfolio, should be divided into sections for class notes, text exercises, a vocabulary list section and compositions. Throughout the course, students should be urged to keep a record of class notes, discussion summaries, responses to text comprehension exercises and new vocabulary. Handouts should also be filed in this portfolio.

For students who are accustomed to being evaluated solely on test results, this is an unfamiliar way of being graded, and in a way, it is much more demanding than cramming for a test or writing a term-end report. Despite this unfamiliarity, however, students have said they like using a portfolio system; they feel it is fair, less stressful than test taking and it allows for individual differences and student autonomy – they themselves are responsible for creating and organizing their course work. Grading this kind of work is not always easy, but for the teacher, portfolios are a way to ensure that students come prepared and are involved in each class. Keeping a portfolio is an ongoing process – it is difficult to put together a portfolio the night before the due date. When students become accustomed to the idea of portfolios they are also becoming accustomed to the idea that language learning is an on-going process in which they can be involved creatively and in a personal way. In addition, the portfolio becomes something that students will want to save as a keepsake, after the course is completed.

Concluding Remarks

There is nothing particularly revolutionary about the idea of using literature in English curriculums at Japanese universities. However, as the needs and interests of our students change, and as we look for materials and methods that will help motivate students, it is worth looking again at the role literature can play for learners in the language class in Japan. Students tell us again and again that they want to be able to communicate in English. As English language teachers we have an obligation to assist our students in the language acquisition process – to help them feel successful, and give them confidence to draw out the best in their own language skills. At the same time, we hope to help students become more aware of significant social issues and their own roles in the broader global community. The study of

literature, if approached in a truly communicative manner, can contribute to both of these goals.

My experience has shown that by engaging Japanese language learners in activities related to short literary works they learn many things about their own identities and culture; they can become aware of the connection between their experiences and the experiences of writers from many different backgrounds. Students can begin to relate themes in literature to personal concerns and then to broader social issues. This process encourages students to be curious about themselves and others.

The different communicative tasks employed in this kind of class can help students gain confidence in their abilities to express themselves in English. These tasks can foster student autonomy as well, and engage the learner in the total process of active language acquisition. For students who have come through the often mind-numbing six years of teacher-centered English classes at junior and senior high school, this unfamiliar approach to learning may require some getting used to, but it may also come as a welcome relief.

For the teacher, selecting materials and designing activities for this kind of class requires quite a bit of reflective practice. We need to constantly observe our students and our classes and be aware of what seems to be working and what is not. Syllabi and lesson plans prepared for a group of students one year, may not work well for another group the following year. We need to constantly adjust. Students today are not the same as those we taught twenty years ago; we must endeavor to understand their changing interests, views and abilities. As we teachers get older, the age gap between us and our students gets larger and this becomes increasingly challenging. As educators, however, we need to acknowledge that we never master the art of teaching; our classrooms continually provide us with the best resources to keep learning.

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