

Teaching Ideas in Shakespeare

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This paper notes that whilst there are some problematic factors that teachers need to consider when contemplating introducing the works of William Shakespeare into Japanese tertiary reading classes, this need not prevent them from doing so. Indeed, despite possessing antiquated language and idioms that our students may not be familiar with, Shakespeare's plays contain poetic ideas and themes that are universal to the human experience. This study recommends three approaches that have been utilized with sophomore university English students to teach key ideas in the plays *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*. It argues that, when they are explicated, realizing these ideas can equip our students with insights additional to language or cultural acquisition, because such literature contains ideas that are part of the shared human condition.

この論文はウィリアム・シェークスピアの作品を日本の大学のリーディングクラスで紹介する際、教師はいくつかの問題があるという事を考慮する必要があるありますが、これらの問題は彼の作品を教えることを妨げる理由ではないという事を言及しています。シェークスピアの古典は古い書体と慣用語句の為、生徒には馴染みがないかも知れませんが、全ての人々が共有する詩的な見解とテーマを含んでいます。この論文はマクベス、ロミオ&ジュリエット、ハムレットの演劇の重要なテーマを教える際に使用した3つのアプローチ方法をお薦めしています。これらのテーマが生徒に平易に教えられる時、文学は外国の文化や知識、私達がいつの時代であっても共有してきた考え方を含み、学ぶことができるという事を論じています。

Shakespeare and Japanese students

When considering introducing selections of authentic literature, such as works by Shakespeare, into Japanese tertiary English reading classes, there are several problems for teachers to consider. Although Brumfit (2001) informs us that classic literature can afford students the chance to understand foreign cultures at a deeper, more satisfyingly complex level others note with concern the difficulties that Japanese students of English face whilst studying such authentic texts in the classroom (Waring, 2006). Many EFL students experience reading comprehension problems when moving from basic decoding to reading with

fluency. This is often the result of a number of obstacles, including limited vocabulary and lack of textual background knowledge. Practitioners seeking to teach authentic literature must find ways to contend with these reading comprehension problems, and two important criteria to consider are the appropriateness of textual length and of theme. Instead of attempting to read several Shakespeare plays over the course of a semester, it might be more advantageous for students to read shorter, thematically relevant selections of poetry or texts that can be specifically adapted to weekly cultural topics discussed in class. Although there may be cultural or

lexical difficulties in comprehending classic literature such as Shakespeare, if the teacher focuses on the relevance of such writers to students' life experiences, rather than any perceived historical worth, such obstacles can be overcome.

Idealizing the real

The works of Shakespeare enjoy and retain a particularly strong cultural caché around the world, and encompass a notable constituent part of the Western literary canon. As Brumfit notes (2001, p. 88), however, the canon has begun to come under increasing attack from those concerned about its role being specifiable to power; it can be read as a social construct, or doxa, whose power is naturalized and unquestionable (Eagleton, 1996, p. 157). These concerns have led some to argue that practitioners should avoid introducing authentic culture into the English language classroom due to its perceived hegemonic properties.

Yet for those students hoping to attain fluency in English, Shakespeare's influence is difficult to wholly avoid, either culturally or linguistically, whether his works are read by students or not. Shakespearean language has had an impact on the English lexicon, and Crystal observes that the two most important influences on the development of the language during the final decades of the Renaissance are the works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible of 1611 (1996, p.62). Hundreds of new words, which appeared in print for the first time in Shakespeare's plays, are reflected in our usage today, from lexical firsts such as 'obscene', 'accommodation', 'barefaced' and 'eventful' to idiomatic expressions such as 'love is blind', 'cold comfort', 'salad days' and 'forgone conclusion' (Crystal, 1996, p. 63). Shakespearean phrases are often used and repeated by native speakers of English in regular spoken conversation, and can even be employed by those with no working knowledge of Shakespeare's works. Students engaging regularly with contemporary English print culture such as magazines and newspapers are likely to see him cited or referred to in some capacity, such as in a recent U.K Guardian environmental article which ends with an extended quotation from *The Tempest*

(Monbiot, 2012).

Long before Japanese English students reach advanced levels of reading fluency, however, they are also likely to encounter the image of Shakespeare in university textbooks and study abroad texts. The continuing cultural caché of Shakespeare has seen his image employed by organizations like the British Council to represent the cultural face of the United Kingdom. His image is also employed in ELT textbooks such as *English File: Student's Book Upper Intermediate* (Oxenden, 2001, p. 112), and information about his life is used for gap-fill writing exercises in *New Headway Beginner Workbook* (Falla, Soars & Soars, 2002, p. 51). Shakespeare is often juxtaposed in textbooks alongside simplified, stereotypical examples of British culture such as pubs and tea, and, when used in this way, becomes exploited as a symbol of Britain. Shakespeare's image is thus presented as an idealized, stereotypical exemplar of genius, as recognizable to Japanese English students as a Nike swoosh. For teachers who care about the importance of literature in the classroom, however, it should be of concern that Shakespeare is presented to students in such a fashion without necessarily being read; the specific reasons for Shakespeare's greatness, and the potential insights his works can offer students, will remain unpacked and elusive unless students are led to engage critically with his works. To teach a more complete understanding of Shakespeare entails leading students to recognize some of the key ideas in his works, rather than simply idealizing his image.

Realizing the idea

Teaching Shakespeare to Japanese university students should entail illustrating what makes him unique in the Western cultural and intellectual tradition, and yet also teaching what makes him perfectly suited to our own modern era, and, indeed, to any culture. Shakespeare is historically connected to the Protestantism of Martin Luther and the pessimistic honesty of Montaigne; in his freedom of mind and in his ambiguous absence of dogma, he marks the end of the heroic Catholic spirit of the Renaissance. Whilst during the 15th century, Italian Renaissance man was perceived as a god and as the

measure of all things, by the dawn of the 17th century in Protestant England, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* depicted man as "this quintessence of dust . . . man delights not me" (1623/1966, p. 883). Works such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear* grapple with complexity without resorting to dogmatic answers; this idea that literature should function as a vehicle for contemplation rather than logical utility or religious morality, later defined by Keats as "negative capability" which "Shakespeare possessed so enormously" (1848/1996, p. 1015), added something almost completely new to literature.

Yet while Shakespeare can be considered a linear product of the Protestant Reformation, he was, as Ben Jonson wrote in tribute, "not of an age, but for all time" (Burgess, 1970, p. 261). His works chime just as well with our modern age due to the ambiguity of his philosophy, his knowledge of the human heart, his deep sensibility for what it is to be human, and for his handling of complexity. His works refuse to oversimplify or idealize, instead contributing to our understanding of the human condition, and in doing so, fulfilling what many argue to be the criteria of classic literature (Brumfit, 2001, p. 91). Such literature contains written ideas that may echo sentiments shared by all; feelings or impressions that people may implicitly sense without necessarily expressing them in language. In these instances, reading Shakespeare may make us feel that our own thoughts "come back to us with a certain alienated majesty." (Emerson, 1841/1980, p. 300). This universality makes Shakespeare's works just as suited to our students' era as any other.

Teaching such classic literature to Japanese students is fraught with potential problems, however. The teaching of such cultural skills or thinking skills in ELT is often sacrificed to meet immediate utilitarian needs such as language acquisition, so that English teaching is likely to exclude "cultural values and identities, or expressive and aesthetic characteristics" (Howatt & Widdowson, 2004, p. 357). ELT can therefore be seen to exclude such skills, instead often placing the emphasis in textbooks on specific brands and products such as Coca-Cola, Rolex, Nokia, Mercedes and KFC (Cunningham, Moor & Comyns, 2005, p. 107), and advocating

specific vocational roles (Gray, 2010, p. 21) whilst ignoring the economic, political and social problems that underlie students' educational needs (Tollefson, 1991, p. 101). In an age where students face many psychological pressures to achieve grades, obtain jobs and fulfil lifestyle goals, studying literature, which contains expressive and aesthetic characteristics, may yield benefits that, while difficult to quantify objectively or summatively, can gift students with the broader perspective needed to help them place their goals and aspirations within a richer context.

In reading Shakespeare, students are not just learning English or studying foreign culture, they are also learning that there are specific universal experiences that all humans share across cultures, which can be expressed, transmitted and obtained through the power of the human creative imagination. In the following sections I will detail how short selections of Shakespearean speeches and poetry were taught to sophomore English reading students at a Japanese university for the purpose of achieving these ends. These extracts were introduced into classes at selected times during the academic year, and, as the students were not familiar with reading Shakespeare, this meant that the selection of texts had to be both tailored to students' language abilities and also, if possible, thematically connected to their specific experiences and interests. Although, due to time constraints, attempting complete coverage of Shakespeare's plays would have been difficult, short sections of speeches and soliloquies from *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet* were used in reading classes to attempt to illustrate Shakespearean themes. It was hoped that these ideas would resonate with students, giving them cause to access deeper channels of perception and to consider thoughts beyond the scope of most English classes. Ideas in these short pieces of literature were explicated through the use of three different methods: comparisons with other short examples of poetry, comparisons with excerpts from graded readers, and utilization of audio-visual materials.

Comparing ideas in poetic language

Literary language can realize ideas through

grammatical imagery such as using metaphor and simile to encapsulate complex themes in concrete terms. To illustrate this, I chose to teach my reading students the famous soliloquy from *Macbeth* Act 5, scene 5 (Shakespeare, 1623/1966, p. 867), in which Macbeth realizes, upon his wife's death, the futility of ambition in the face of death, and I compared this with a short example of poetry by the present-day beat poet and lyricist John Cooper-Clarke. Material by Cooper-Clarke was chosen due to the simplicity of its style and its contemporary subject matter, which, it was felt, would be more accessible for students than Shakespearean texts, while also providing a useful comparison between similar ideas in older and modern poetry. First, the focus of the class centered on the mechanics of language, and I taught the structural differences between metaphor (a thing regarded as symbolic of something else which uses words such as 'is', 'was' and 'but') and simile (a comparison of one thing for another which uses words such as 'like' and 'as'). Students performed a series of grammar exercises where they inserted the above words into simile and metaphor sentence gaps, and were then expected to compose their own similes and metaphors to describe things related to their lives, such as friends, home, music, and television programs. After exchanging these ideas with their classmates, students were given the line, "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more," (1623/1966, p. 867) from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to read; as well as a line from Cooper-Clarke's poem *Twat*, "Like a nightclub in the morning, you're the bitter end" (Cooper-Clarke, 1979). The students' first task was to discuss and identify which one was an example of simile and which an example of metaphor.

Moving beyond grammar analysis, I then advised the students that both excerpts were pejorative, and used imagery to deal with negative themes, and I asked students to list and discuss things that they felt negative about in their lives. From their conversationally generated ideas, I wrote a number of words on the board that they might feel negative about, such as friends, co-workers, family members, and life. Using words from this written selection,

the class was required to guess which idea each poem described negatively. The students identified that while Cooper-Clarke's lines focused on an unnamed person, Shakespeare's lines centered on human existence. The students' next task was to identify how these things were described. To achieve this, I asked students to list forms of entertainment which they might participate in or attend during an evening, and from their generated ideas, I wrote on the board places such as restaurant, bar, cinema, nightclub, theatre, and so forth. The students once again decided which words fitted with each poem, and whilst nightclub was easily matched with Cooper-Clarke's poem, theatre was eventually connected to the player in Shakespeare's speech. At this point the students were able to identify the type of metaphorical imagery that Shakespeare uses to describe the insignificance of ambition in the face of the inevitability of death, denoting human life symbolically as a theatre actor who briefly "struts and frets his hour upon the stage", "full of sound and fury" (1623/1966, p. 868), but who must then ultimately disappear, "signifying nothing" (p. 868). The students also realized that the use of metaphor (as opposed to simile) in this soliloquy makes the meaning of Macbeth's speech more powerful, bitter and resonant; rendering a poor actor and human existence exactly like for like. Post-reading conversation then centered on students' various ambitions, and following this, a discussion was held on the importance of pursuing one's goals whilst still attempting to hold a self-aware and realistic approach to life.

Using graded readers

When reading Shakespeare, short comparison extracts from graded readers can greatly aid students' appreciation of key lines, and can also clarify the meaning of scenes. Graded readers have been advocated by a number of scholars (Krashen, 1993; Waring 2006) for extensive reading purposes, but short sentences from graded readers can also be used in class alongside truncated sections of authentic texts for comparative micro-reading exercises. I used such micro-reading examples when teaching students Juliet's famous balcony speech from *Romeo*

and *Juliet*, Act II, Scene II, first showing the students the authentic text, and then inviting them to discuss what was happening in the scene, and what the main point of Juliet's speech was. Many students already seemed very visually familiar with this balcony scene through imagery they had encountered in films and animation, and most answered that Juliet appeared to be searching for Romeo from her balcony. This perception was further enforced by Juliet's famous line "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" (Shakespeare, 1623/1966, p. 772). However, the students were then shown the graded reader version of the scene, leading them to understand that Juliet's speech focuses on the arbitrary nature of language, names and titles, as she asks, apropos of no-one, "why are you called Romeo?" (Collins, 2002, p12) This in turn also led students to understand that the original meaning of 'wherefore' was 'why.' I then asked the students to discuss various flowers they liked, and, giving them a selection of alternative words, asked them whether they would look as beautiful or smell as fresh with these different names. Having undertaken this discussion, the focus then once again returned to the authentic text of Juliet's speech, and the students debated the relevance of the succeeding lines "what's in a name? That which we call a rose/ By any other name would smell as sweet" (Shakespeare, 1623/1966, p772). The students were able to perceive that the rose, a symbol of beauty, passion and romance, is subverted by Shakespeare and is instead used as a symbol for making a point about language not resembling the thing it describes. By combining these sentences with earlier examples from the graded reader, I was able to scaffold the overall meaning of Juliet's speech about language not being nomenclatural. Whilst most students seem to be familiar with the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, and are aware that it ends tragically, an understanding of the ideas expressed in Juliet's speech allows students to understand this tragedy more profoundly; as members of opposing families, Romeo and Juliet ultimately fail to realize their pure love due to the influence of arbitrary names, titles and status. Having considered such an idea, the class discussion then concluded by focusing on how the influence of language, names,

and titles influenced the students' lives in subtle but profound ways.

Using audio-visuals

In addition to using comparative examples from poetry and graded readers, audio and visual media can also be employed in a similar vein. Such media can scaffold student comprehension of textual content (Lonergan, 1984, p. 80), and are suited to the purpose of aiding student realization of ideas in Shakespeare. I used images from Western art and carefully selected video clips to explicate one of the key ideas in *Hamlet*; the reductive circle of life speech recited by Hamlet in the churchyard in Act V, Scene I. To elevate students to a position where they could understand the ideas encapsulated in this monologue, it was necessary to compare and contrast the depiction of Hamlet as a protagonist with a number of figures from Western culture preceding him. I began by exploring with students the heroic tradition in Western art. The students were shown the *Mosaic of the Battle of Issus* (100BC), which depicts Alexander of Macedonia heroically in his battle with Darius the Persian King. The students were subsequently shown examples of Western art from the Renaissance, viewing photos of Michaelangelo's *David*, figures from the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and Raphael's frescos. Having viewed these heroic depictions of historical figures, the students discussed their opinions regarding what, in their opinion, constituted heroism, and they debated the potential good and bad points of such emphasis on heroic depiction in art, literature, comics and movies.

Students then engaged with a short extract from *Hamlet*, and by comparing the aforementioned examples of heroic art with Kenneth Branagh's (2007) film version of *Hamlet* I was able to illustrate how Shakespeare's protagonist differs from the Renaissance heroic tradition which preceded him. Students first watched a short movie sequence containing the famous graveyard speech, where Hamlet encounters Yorick's skull, and subsequently discussed their opinions regarding the meaning of the soliloquy. Since Hamlet was mourning the death of an old childhood friend, the meaning of the

speech was deepened through distributing handouts of the written text. The handouts also contained an accompanying sequence of numbered pictures that corresponded with lines in the text to help clarify the meaning of the speech. Whilst artists within the heroic tradition had idealized the real, Shakespeare uses Hamlet's graveyard speech to fund and energize a powerful philosophical idea; the reductive cycle of life returning all, including even the most glamorous, beautiful and heroically depicted, to the ignominy of base matter. In specific relation to Alexander the Great, Hamlet notes that "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust" (Shakespeare, 1623/1966, p. 902), and to emphasize this point, the Alexander mosaic picture was placed at the start of the sequence of images I showed to students, followed by a picture of a dusty grave. To explain Hamlet's observation that "the dust is earth; of earth we make loam" (*ibid.*, p. 902), the next picture in the sequence was a photograph of a clay ball, while the lines "and why of that loam, whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer barrel?" (*ibid.*, p. 902) were scaffolded by inserting a picture of a barrel hole as the last picture within the sequence of images. Having read the speech in tandem with viewing these sequential images, the students discussed what differentiated *Hamlet* from classic artistic works or contemporary literary or visual characters, and finally debated whether placing importance upon appearance and imagery was a worthwhile exercise in life.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested the importance of teaching short selections of Shakespeare to Japanese university English students, and have argued that through using various techniques authentic literature and complex ideas can be rendered comprehensible and accessible. Others, however, may well question whether English teachers should devote their time to striving to explicate such texts, and, in doing so, whether such ideas will chime with students' interests

or vocational pursuits. Students are becoming more accustomed to simplified, idealized, image-based depictions of the world around them, largely through an increasing amount of time spent online. Research by neuroscientist Gary Small (as cited in Carr, 2011, p. 120) has illustrated how digital technology can effect rapid and profound alterations to our brains, and has revealed key differences in brain activity between book readers and experienced Internet users. An ostensible lack of student interest in reading complex literature in the face of increasing Internet use has been compounded by a growing emphasis on utility in modern education; students are encouraged to acquire languages such as English that suit economic and vocational necessities, with many arguing that the teaching of classic literature is now merely surplus to requirements. However, in an age of rapidly increasing social distraction, where more and more of our students' time is being occupied with abundant forms of idealized fantasy in movies, Web 2.0 applications, comic books and branded commercials, teaching the ideas found in Shakespeare is perhaps now more important than ever.

Perhaps no other writer has so clearly realized in literature what it is to be human; the compulsion to strive and fight to live one's life even in the face of the sheer meaninglessness of the human condition. Through scaffolding ideas in Shakespeare, students can learn to consider (and hopefully place in perspective, in the face of human transience) the ultimate importance of man-made beliefs and cultural ideas that subliminally shape the direction of their lives, but yet create many explicitly social and unconsciously personal problems. Such literature can yield up to our students profound new insights, gifting them with new methods for developing fortitude when dealing with life's problems and stresses as they move forward from university examinations to job interviews, from graduation to the grave. Shakespeare's literature needs only to be unpacked and explicated so that students can access and realize these ideas.

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