

A Conversation with Neil Addison

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Neil Addison is a lecturer at Tokyo Woman`s Christian University and is a member of the LiLT SIG. Neil`s presentation at the 2013 JALT National forum on *Finding Shakespeare* helped to frame the use of Hamlet in modern, Japanese teaching contexts. Neil has a number of ongoing projects linked with literature in language teaching, some of which he shares in this interview.

TM: First, could you describe a bit of your background and how you came to be interested in literature?

NA: I wasn`t a particularly motivated student when I was younger, but in my final school year I happened to have a charismatic literature teacher who largely through sheer force of personality instilled an interest in books. He had a rather quirky and humorous way of introducing texts and making them come alive, and from this I developed a nascent interest in reading literature which, after I`d left school, gradually grew into a fully fledged autodidacticism. Of course, as we all know, becoming a committed reader is akin to opening Pandora`s Box; each book one reads references and signposts the way to another book, being part of a vast interconnected tapestry, so once my independent reading trip kick-started in earnest I was hooked for life. I realized, as all people who love literature do, that reading connects us to an expansive historical archive of human thoughts, sensations and experiences, and allows us to travel through time and space. It makes us empathetic, as we begin to see the world from other people`s personal and cultural perspectives. Yet I found that the greatest thing about reading was discovering that things written in books by other people corresponded to and were qualified by my own life experiences. Literature gives voice to our voiceless thoughts, and puts a kind of official stamp on universal instincts and sensations that we all implicitly feel, and yet can`t always articulate or express

when we feel them. As Seamus Heaney said, literature allows us to credit the promptings of our intuitive mind.

After several years spent working I returned to formal education and entered the University of Kent as an English literature major, and from there my winding road brought me to Japan to teach English in an EFL context. Yet, as time has passed I've gradually started to bring literature more and more into my language classes, becoming as much a literature teacher as an English teacher. Remembering my own educational background and the important role that teachers can have in motivating students' interests, my teaching approach involves striving to try and bring literature alive for my students.

TM: What are some of the teaching experiences which have shaped your views of literature as a teacher and student?

NA: From a student's perspective I realized from an early age that the natural personality, and enthusiasm of my literature teacher was an important factor in my learning process. I noticed that individual things certain teachers did or said often helped encode specific pieces of information in my mind. The information I successfully remembered from classes was often due to the style in which it was taught, and its physical and acoustic mental associations. Years on, despite having obtained a CELTA and an MA in applied linguistics, I still hold the suspicion that a teacher's individual presence and unique style can on occasions trump the more orthodox methodological codes and practices learnt in teacher training. I think that this is particularly the case when teaching literature or content related emotive subjects, as seizing students' attention at a profoundly visceral level is important. The problem, however, with this teaching quality is that it is (as bemoaned by the headmaster in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*) difficult to quantify. Obviously, having a structured, well planned, step by step curriculum is important when teaching reading, and yet within that framework I feel that literature teachers should also be given a chance to use their own unique 'horse sense' to find what content works well for their particular students. There needs to be dynamism between the two factors.

TM: How is literature particularly useful, more so than other types of texts, do you think?

NA: Firstly, I guess it depends on how you would define literature and seek to distinguish it from other texts. Are all texts literature? Most of us wouldn't agree with that, and yet defining literature in absolute terms is problematic. Samuel Johnson famously commented that it was easier to define what literature wasn't than what it was. In which case should we define literature purely in terms designated by the traditional canon? Again, this is problematic, as the canon has come under attack from people like Terry Eagleton for being an ideological construct, organized by powerful competing groups who assert the values of specific writers for their own ends. Emily Dickinson is one of the greatest poetic stylists of all time, yet her poetry was initially considered by the canon to be the work of someone who did not correctly understand style! D.H. Lawrence's place within the canon has also been defined and redefined depending on the social, moral and stylistic mores of the time, moving from pornographer in-chief to high priest of modernist literature. Now many universities are apparently taking him off the curriculum again, as his position is once more brought under review.

Yet in terms of defining literature which is specifically useful in the classroom, I believe we need to select texts which have some undercurrent of complexity about them. By complexity, I don't necessarily mean complexity of language. Our students obviously won't enjoy trudging through impenetrable texts with large numbers of polysyllabic words and multi-clause sentences, whilst making them do so may undermine any vocabulary or content based teaching aims we might have. Instead I mean that we should look for works that deal with complex, and challenging themes which will stimulate our students. We should select texts for the classroom which truthfully and honestly represent the complex world in which we live. For example, we can say that Shakespeare's literature is greater than Tom Clancy's because Shakespeare represents his characters in a more truthfully complex way than Clancy does. Hamlet appears intensely human to us because of his imperfections, his constant changes of heart and his paranoia, while Clancy's characters are more two dimensional. It's impossible to discuss the latter's texts for any great length of time beyond mere description of plot or sequential events. Great literature, however, writes about the human condition with honesty, and shows us to be complex, contradictory beings living in a confusing and difficult world. It's pedagogically more honest to bring these sorts of challenging materials into the classroom than distributing content which represents the world simplistically.

In a previous journal interview Wendy Jones Nakanishi wrote about simplified textbook topics reducing students to the conversational level of simple-minded adolescents, whilst using demanding literary content takes their conversation to a more interesting adult level. I couldn't agree more! My old literature teacher brought Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* into our literature-phobic school English class, and it sent shockwaves through the room. It was a 'Wizard of Oz' moment in our lives, as if someone had pulled back the curtain and revealed what was behind it, and it prompted weeks of discussion. Even though the language was difficult for us, by breaking key chapters of the text down into manageable reading chunks and through paraphrasing when necessary he brought it alive.

Of course, as I said before, such literature needn't possess particularly demanding language. Charles Bukowski noted that an artist or writer says a complex thing in a simple way, and it's a credo I'm keen to adhere to as a teacher. Such materials don't have to take the form of conventional literature to be challenging. As some contributors to this journal have already previously argued, the constraints of the traditional canon perhaps need to be re-conceptualised, so that manga, movies and other forms of art can be incorporated. So I don't believe it's a strict literature versus text issue, but more a case of selecting something with an undercurrent of complexity (be it Tolstoy, Shakespeare, a TV show or a comic book) which will challenge the students. If we can find a way to make such complex content come alive and make it meaningful to our students then it becomes incredibly useful as a reading, thinking and communicative prompt.

TM: On to Shakespeare, and Hamlet, then. What makes The Bard relevant to today's students, in your opinion?

NA: Shakespeare has become an economic cottage industry at home and abroad, and is unfortunately used today as an elitist form of cultural or commercial symbolism. His image can be found in British ELT textbooks like Headway, juxtaposed next to pictures of the Queen and fish and chips. We tend to think of him not as an actual living and breathing historical human being but instead as this idealized cultural exemplar of greatness, and of course this tends to

intimidate Japanese students, and make them immediately apprehensive (as I was at school) about reading him. Because of this it seems that the Bard is often barred from the English reading classroom! This is a great pity because Shakespeare actually wrote for the groundlings, the common audiences. He used the common vernacular of the day, and because of this it made its way into the lexicon via the mass printing of his plays. In many ways he can be seen as the poet laureate of the common man, remarking in *King Lear* that the pompous upper classes (arguably addressed to King James) should ‘take physic’ and consent to feel what wretches feel. He was actually looked down on by other university educated playwrights such as Robert Greene for being a populist – an uneducated “upstart crow” or troublemaker. Yet as Ben Jonson wrote, he was not of an age, but for all time. His themes still resonate with us today, because, like Dostoevsky or Tolstoy he holds a mirror up to mankind, and shows us to be complex, inconsistent and flawed, with the capacity for both good and evil. In doing this his plays provide a sustained and sophisticated contribution to our understanding of the human condition. His characters contend with problems that still dominate our lives today, as we attempt to deal with the subtleties of the human heart, form relationships, build lives and search for meaning in them, often in the face of sheer meaninglessness.

TM: How do you introduce Shakespeare in class? And how do you keep interest high?

NA: I don’t tend to teach the entire plays, but instead focus on specific segments of poetic speeches. When doing so I’ll often ask the students to compare ideas in these examples with similarly related themes in other short texts such as contemporary poetry by John Cooper-Clarke, or even pop songs lyrics. Before introducing the poetry, however, I’ll distribute simple overviews of the plots with accompanying focus questions before then moving to character analysis. We go over some the problems specific characters might have, and the students will discuss in groups or pairs what the main protagonist or the supporting characters should do. For example, I asked them what they would do in Hamlet’s place and gave them a series of possible options. When most of them looked crestfallen and replied that they didn’t know I told them that this was of course Hamlet’s problem. Most of his difficulties are inherited, and he is given an almost unplayable lie, to use a golfing analogy, so that his future actions are contaminated by the source of these problems. Once we have focused on the character-driven problems, I start to pull

back and look more at the possible cultural discourses which may influence the play, and the problems of the characters. In the case of teaching Hamlet and his inherited problems, we looked at two oppositional cultural traditions in art which preceded the writing of the play; the renaissance heroic tradition and the culture of *memento mori*, the remembrance of death. The students discussed one particular painting by Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors*, which seems to contain strains of both of these traditions locked together within the canvas, and they then connected them to contemporary heroic and prosaic depictions of characters in movies, manga and novels. We then returned to Hamlet and, having previously studied the mechanics of metaphor and simile performed some close reading work on the metaphorical language found in several of his key soliloquies with reference to these discourses. For example, when Hamlet describes himself as being a rogue and peasant slave he is chastising himself for his heroic deficiencies, yet when he juxtaposes man as like an angel and yet a quintessence of dust he is subverting this heroic renaissance tradition. I then asked the students to consider whether these discourses influenced Hamlet's indecisive and wavering actions in the play, and more contemporaneously, how cultural, social and family inheritance shapes their own thoughts and actions in Japan. Through teaching in this way I try to make the students see that Hamlet's problems are the common lot of us all. None of us are able to choose how or where we are born; we are all brought into the world with linguistic, cultural and family baggage, and have to bear this problematic inheritance whilst trying to navigate forwards through life.

TM: Have you met with any reluctance or aversion to Shakespeare, and how might you deal with that?

NA: The only reluctance or antagonism I might possibly face is at the start of the class, if I were to grandly announce to the students that they are going to study Shakespeare, or poetry, or literature for that matter. Instead of doing this I ease things in gently, with simplified overviews and lots of discussion before beginning to assign readings from the authentic texts themselves. By the time that the students are immersed in the ideas, moving to the literature itself seems relatively painless.

TM: What other writers and texts are you particularly taken with which have some uses in the

language classroom?

NA: A colleague Neil Conway and I have recently been teaching romantic 18th century poetry such as Wordsworth at separate institutions, and conducting combined post-course research on our students' attitudes and opinions. Our study can be found in the 2013 JALT PanSIG Proceedings, which should hopefully be in print by now. While we feel that graded readers have an important role to play in consolidating language acquisition outside of the classroom we also think it's important to also get beyond the headword and teach authentic texts such as poetry, which can afford students valuable examples of how lexical chunks of language collocate and form, as Wittgenstein says, family relationships. Poetry, we believe, is perfect for in-depth L2 classroom analysis of authentic literary language, as the time consuming process of reading a novel can be negated without cheapening the complexity level. We chose to teach the poetry of Romanticism (and its opposition to the Industrial Revolution) because we wanted texts whose historical themes would connect with contemporary concerns familiar to our students' lives such as global warming and pollution. As Saint Augustine once said, in the new does the old unfold. Students were first asked to discuss some of the main recurring themes found in Studio Ghibli animated films, such as animals versus humans and science, and industry versus nature before discussing the same opposing discourses in examples of British romantic landscape art. Having identified these thematic tensions the students were then given different Wordsworth poems that addressed these oppositional themes, and having performed adjectival gap fill exercises they were required to discuss the meaning of the descriptive and metaphorical language in relation to these discourses.

TM: Do you have any advice for teachers attempting to approach literature?

NA: I don't have anything especially valuable to say in terms of advice, other than (of course without question) to be passionate about what you do, and the text that you are trying to teach, (be it literature or other forms of content) as the students will know when you are merely going through the motions, and will respond accordingly. Passion will give you a huge head start, but it won't carry you all the way. As the poet Mark Halliday documents in his amusing *Moose Failure* essay, just being passionate about a poem isn't enough. We need to consider how a text

will be perceived from the students' point of view, key it to their interests, and then scaffold appropriately. Just dumping a literary text into the students' laps and expecting the beauty of the piece to captivate them rarely works. That said, with careful planning and thoughtful foregrounding of literary ideas, themes and cultural background it's likely that introducing literature into the classroom will be one of the most satisfying classroom experiences students and teachers can ever have.

TM: What are your 2014 plans, as far as teaching, presenting and writing go?

NA: I'm currently co-writing a Cultural Studies textbook with another colleague Barnaby Ralph, which we hope will give teachers a critical yet practical framework to approach short stories, images and other forms of culture. I'm also going to be presenting at a Tokyo literature conference entitled 'Romantic Connections' in June, where I hope to discuss the relationship between the Western literary tradition of Orientalism, and its residue in modern English teaching practices abroad.

TM: Thanks Neil, and best of luck for all of your future writing and teaching.