

Using Japanese literature in translation in the EFL classroom

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Abstract

This article explores the use of Japanese literature in English translation as a centerpiece for class discussion in a Japanese university context. I discuss my use of a contemporary short story—Philip Gabriel’s English translation of Haruki Murakami’s “Yesterday” (Murakami, 2014)—as a vehicle for vocabulary development and to stimulate discussion about language and identity in a third-year English oral communication class. After describing the context of the class and a profile of its students, I discuss my choice of the story for use in class, summarize the story’s plot and characters, and discuss the preparations and tasks undertaken by students. Finally, I consider the success of my experiment based on student feedback and reflexive analysis.

Context

My experiment in using literature in an EFL class took place within the context of a third-year elective oral communication class at a medium-sized, private, four-year university in central Japan. The class contained nine students, all of whom were advanced and highly motivated English language learners in the Department of English and American Studies within the university’s Faculty of Foreign Studies. Two students had studied abroad on long-term programs (6 and 8 months), one had spent a gap year between high school and college in the US (studying at a language school and staying with English-speaking relatives), and two students had studied on short-term language programs abroad (both for 2 months). The remaining five students had never studied abroad. The university’s English department where this class is taught uses G-Telp and TOEIC scores to stream students within each grade, and these students were all part of the top stream because they had maintained TOEIC scores of 550 or higher since the end of their first year.

As an advanced undergraduate oral communication class for English majors, course objectives included vocabulary development, the promotion of spoken and written genre awareness, and development of critical and empathetic thinking skills.

Choosing the Story

I chose to introduce the story entitled “Yesterday” by Murakami Haruki for a variety of reasons. First, I see Murakami Haruki’s fiction as uniquely adept at blending Japanese and Western cultural traditions. As one of Japan’s most prominent contemporary authors who writes for both domestic and international audiences, Murakami’s stories and novels are set predominantly in Japan but nevertheless feature frequent reference to popular American and British culture. This means that although Murakami’s stories are translated into English from Japanese, they are also in a sense bicultural.

More specifically, however, I chose this particular story because it seemed to address issues important to 21st century post-adolescent language learners—the complex relationships that exist between language use and identity, social positioning, desire, and mobility. These are all issues that emerge from what is commonly called “the postmodern condition.” In the past twenty years, with the acceleration of globalization, these issues have gained prominence in academia as a whole and also in the field of second language acquisitions studies (see, for example, Kramsch, 2009; Pierce, 1995; and Rampton, 1990, 2004). Of course, by using this story in class I did not set out to help students discuss theoretical aspects of “the post-modern condition.” I did, however, aim to use the story to raise students’ awareness about these issues, and their relation to language learning in the 21st century.

The Story

“Yesterday” tells the story of two college-aged men who have become friends while working together at a cafe in Tokyo. The narrator, Tanimura, is a college student who was born and raised in Kobe and is living in Tokyo while attending Waseda University. His new friend, Kitaru, is the same age but in quite a different position. Having failed his college entrance exams, he is what is known as a *ronin*. He is working part-time while studying for another round of entrance exams.

The story revolves around the two friends' relationship and Kitaru's odd proposal that Tanimura go out on a date with his long-time girlfriend, Erika. Erika, a student at Sophia University, has been Kitaru's high school sweetheart, but when the story begins, they have agreed to put their relationship on hold so Kitaru can focus on studying for his entrance exams. We sense that his failure to live up to expectations by gaining admittance to a prestigious Tokyo university has strained their relationship. We also soon discover that, in truth, Kitaru is only going through the motions of preparing for another round of entrance exams. Before long it becomes clear that Kitaru is actually searching for a way to escape his current circumstances.

It can be argued that the story has a fourth main character. It is not a human but an abstract concept: language and the markings of social class. According to Bourdieu (1991) language and social norms exert a kind of "symbolic domination" on the individual, creating a *habitus* that informs the way an individual exists—physically and psychologically—in the world (p.51). Seen in this light, Kitaru's eccentric yet playful uses of language may signal a desire for escape from the crucible of bourgeois pressures and expectations that envelop him. The most obvious example of this is that despite having been born and raised in Tokyo, Kitaru refuses to speak anything but the dialect of Japan's Kansai region. When pressed at one point by his friend to explain his linguistic choice, he replies:

As a kid, I was a huge Hanshin Tigers fan ... Went to their games whenever they played in Tokyo. But if I sat in the Hanshin bleachers and spoke with a Tokyo dialect nobody wanted to have anything to do with me. Couldn't be part of the community, y'know? So I figured, I gotta learn Kansai dialect, and I worked like a dog to do just that.

Tanimura, who is actually from Kansai, is going through the opposite kind of transition as he quickly and casually sheds his native dialect for the dominant discourse of his new college peers in Tokyo. As he explains:

Until I graduated from high school, I spoke nothing but Kansai dialect. But all it took was a month in Tokyo for me to become completely fluent in Tokyo standard. I was kind of surprised that I could adapt so quickly. Maybe I have a chameleon type of personality. Or maybe my sense of language is more advanced than most people's. Either way, no one believed now that I was actually from Kansai (Murakami, 2014, p. 75).

Like Kitaru, Tanimura realizes that changing the way he speaks is part and parcel with embodying a new identity. It is a tool for trying to escape from the past by inventing a new self:

Another reason I stopped using Kansai dialect was that I wanted to become a totally different person. When I moved from Kansai to Tokyo to start college, I spent the whole bullet-train ride mentally reviewing my eighteen years and realized that almost everything that had happened to me was pretty embarrassing. I'm not exaggerating. I didn't want to remember any of it—it was so pathetic (Murakami, 2014, p. 75).

Rebellion against cookie-cutter middle class life and expectations is another motive that Tanimura and Kitaru share. Reflecting upon his life before college, Tanimura explains:

The more I thought about my life up to then, the more I hated myself. It wasn't that I didn't have a few good memories—I did. A handful of happy experiences. But, if you added them up, the shameful, painful memories far outnumbered the others. When I thought of how I'd been living, how I'd been approaching life, it was all so trite, so miserably pointless. Unimaginative middle-class rubbish, and I wanted to gather it all up and stuff it away in some drawer. Or else light it on fire and watch it go up in smoke (though what kind of smoke it would emit I had no idea). Anyway, I wanted to get rid of it all and start a new life in Tokyo as a brand-new person. Jettisoning Kansai dialect was a practical (as well as symbolic) method of accomplishing this. *Because, in the final analysis, the language we speak constitutes who we are as people. At least that's the way it seemed to me at eighteen* (Murakami, 2014, pp. 75-76, *emphasis added*).

Like much of Murakami's prose, not much happens in this story. It is entirely character-driven with only a series of minor episodes leading to an inconclusive ending. For example, the date that Kitaru suggests for his girlfriend and Tanimura takes place but leads nowhere. They mostly just talk about Kitaru, who shortly thereafter disappears inexplicably. When Tanimura encounters Erika by chance many years later, she tells him that Kitaru has emigrated from Japan to settle in America, where he is working as a sushi chef in Denver, Colorado.

Using the Story in Class

To use the story in class, I followed the following procedure:

1. I handed out the English version of the story (which is 12 magazine pages long) and told the students to read through it over the following two weeks. Given their level, this group of students could probably have completed the story in the week before their next class, but I wanted to give them time to digest the story, and I also wanted to allow time to discuss any difficult language that they discovered in the text. They were also asked to look up words and phrases they didn't know and bring any questions about vocabulary, idioms, etc. to one of the following two classes. I also told them where they could access the Japanese version in case they wanted to read that as well.
2. Two weeks later, after having discussed a few vocabulary items raised by students and confirming their understanding of the main characters and plot points, I divided the students into three groups of three: a character group, a plot group, and a language & technique group. Each group's first task was to just talk about the story freely—to discuss their impressions and reactions. At this time, I circulated among the groups at this time to help the students with anything that was still confusing to them and to join the short discussions that were developing. Students were given about 15 minutes for this task.
3. When I could see that the students had a grasp of the story, I asked each group to develop several (4-5) questions about their assigned area. I encouraged them to start with basic questions (e.g., Who are the main characters?), and then to try to come up with more complex “thought” questions for discussion. Some examples of questions that students came up with are given in Appendix A. Groups took about 30 minutes to complete this stage, and during this time I circulated among the groups, helping with grammar and vocabulary, and making sure the questions were structurally sound and comprehensible. I introduced such key words as (e.g. “symbolize,” “represent,” “metaphor,” and “narrator,” etc.) to the whole class, as these emerged and became necessary for question formation. I gave sample questions and examples using these words, and students were then able to use them in their own questions.

4. Once groups had finished forming their questions, they had 15 or 20 minutes to discuss their answers to these questions within their groups. Then, at the end of the first 90-minute class session, their homework assignment was to think some more about the questions their groups had formed, and to make some notes on their own responses.
5. In the following (2nd) class session, students reconvened for about 20 minutes in their specialist groups and discussed their answers to the questions they had created. I circulated among the groups, helping out with language and also pushing them to probe deeper into the story with additional follow-up questions.
6. The next stage of this activity, which lasted about 30 minutes, was for members of the specialist groups to break up and lead discussions in new, mixed groups. I instructed students to choose one or two questions that had provoked the most discussion in their specialist groups to introduce in their new groups which contained one member from each topic area (plot, characters, and language/technique).
7. The final stage was a full-class discussion at the end of the second class session. Students from each new group shared some of the questions they'd been discussing, and our whole class engaged in a dialogue about these, with various individual students contributing opinions and ideas that they had practiced articulating in their groups.

Assessing the Exercise

To assess the effectiveness of this literature-based exercise and students' reactions to it, after receiving informed consent, students were given the opportunity to fill out and hand in a simple anonymous survey to our university's Student Affairs Office at the end of the semester. The feedback survey was optional, and though the questions were written in English, I told students that they could answer the questions in either English or Japanese or a combination of the two. I arranged to receive the completed surveys from the student affairs office after grading for the semester was completed and finalized.

The survey included the following seven questions:

- 1) What did you think of the story, “Yesterday” by Murakami Haruki?
- 2) Was preparing to discuss the story in class manageable (not too difficult)? Please explain.
- 3) Would you have preferred to read a copy of the story in Japanese first? Why or why not?
- 4) What did you think of the class activity in which you made discussion questions about the story?
- 5) Were small group discussions (using the questions you made) interesting and useful? How?
- 6) Were the full class discussions interesting and useful?
- 7) Would you recommend using this story again in my future Oral Communication III classes? Why or why not?

Results

Unfortunately, only 5 of the 9 students handed in their completed surveys to the Student Affairs Office, as requested. I think there are two reasons for this low return rate. First, because the survey was given to students after the semester’s final exam, some students may have just forgotten to hand in them in the busyness they may have experienced at the semester’s end. Second, students were not required to complete the survey. Since the surveys were anonymous, there were no negative consequences associated with not turning one in. Still, while every class member’s perspective was not included, the surveys that I did receive provided rich qualitative data that confirmed some of my intuitions about the literature-based exercise I had designed and also offered me additional insights into how it might be improved.

Regarding the first survey question, which asked for students’ overall opinions on the story, student responses were mostly positive. One student wrote: “I think it’s interesting and this novel [*sic*] is one of the deepest novels I have ever read. Thanks to this novel I am interested in Haruki Murakami more.” Two other respondents praised the story’s characters, seeming to appreciate their uniqueness. One respondent wrote (in English): “I think it was fun. I like the character of Kitaru. He doesn’t study and asks Tanimura-kun to go date with Erika, his girlfriend. He is a strange person but doing what really want to do.” Another wrote the following in Japanese: 「人間味のある個性的な登場人物が魅力的でした」 which roughly translates to “The uniqueness of the main characters was charming.” One student, however, expressed discontent

with the story and characters, writing: I tried to read it seriously, but it was つまらない ... Sorry ... All of characters had strange personalities, so it was difficult to understand the story.”

The second question asked about students’ ability to read and understand the story in time for our class discussions. While most students indicated that preparation was not overly taxing, one student wrote “Difficult!! because I couldn’t understand the story.” Another student indicated that preparation was challenging, but ultimately valuable: “I’m not good at reading, so it took much to read. However, I could enjoy reading and discussing.” A third respondent, wrote that though the story was not hard, she¹ was dissatisfied with the unevenness of her classmates’ preparation, writing “Not so difficult but ストリーを把握していないクラスメイトの話し合いは大変でした (translation: “It was difficult to hold a discussion with classmate(s) who had not yet grasped the story”).

The third survey question asked whether students would have preferred to read the Japanese version of the story first. Four out of five students answered no to this question, praising the value of challenging themselves with the English text only. Here one student admitted not reading the story, claiming she did not have time, but did not answer the question of whether or not she would have preferred Japanese language scaffolding.

The fourth question asked about the question-making activities. While one student’s response to the prompt was simply “It was difficult,” the other students all expressed appreciation for the task’s structure. For example, one student wrote: “I liked it!! I’ve been waiting for the activity like this. Actually, it’s difficult to tell our opinion and to share our opinions.” Another wrote: “I liked it because I could understand the story and ask questions through discussion in class.”

Questions 5 and 6 asked students about the in-class discussions. Students who answered these questions were generally positive about the discussion structures, but one student again noted that both small group and full class discussions were “useful” but “difficult for me.” Regarding the small group discussions, several students noted that they enjoyed the opportunity to hear different perspectives from their classmates. One student noted that full class discussions were motivating, writing: “all students are very good at English, so its very useful for me.”

¹ As the surveys were anonymous, the gender of this and other respondents was unknown. The female pronoun is used here and subsequently for syntactical simplicity.

Another stated that she would have liked more time devoted to full-class discussions, as such opportunities had been rare over the course of the semester.

The final question asked whether or not students would recommend using the story in a future class. Three students said yes. Two of these students elaborated on their opinion, writing: “I recommend. The story is fun. In addition, Murakami Haruki is a famous writer, so it can get students’ interest” and “Its not just speaking English but thinking story and speaking our opinion.” The third student wrote only “Yes.” Of the two remaining students, one simply wrote “No,” whereas another wrote that though it is interesting to read a piece of Japanese fiction in English, it would be best to choose a little bit easier story in the future.

Reflection & Pedagogical Implications

The survey results confirmed my intuition that using “Yesterday” as a vehicle for class discussion was generally successful and well-received. A shortcoming of the questionnaire was that it did not allow students to demonstrate their grasp of the language and identity issues raised by the story, but this is something I was able to assess in the course’s final interviews. Based on these, I found that by relating to Murakami’s quirky college student characters, students demonstrated increased ability to articulate connections between language and identity, and many engaged in perspective-taking about their own relationship with English.

From a methodological perspective, it would have been better to allot class-time for students to fill out the survey in order to guarantee a higher return rate, but the responses I received nevertheless demonstrated that some students may need more scaffolding in order to more completely appreciate the story. Results also reiterated the common sense notion that literature is sometimes just a matter of taste, and thus it may be hard to please all students all the time. The absence of an established “canon” of contemporary literature appropriate for the EFL classroom makes choosing literary texts difficult, but since this story raises important issues relevant to language learning in our global era, it seems to have served a valuable purpose. Further, some students appreciate Murakami and the post-modern topics he addresses, while others do not. However, because the overall response from students on their surveys and in class was positive, I feel confident that it is worth using again. Murakami’s writing style typically features simple sentence structure and vocabulary and thus usually translates into easily

comprehensible English prose. Still, as some students indicated that the story was difficult, it could be useful to pre-teach difficult words and phrases before assigning the story. This could help ease the burden of comprehending the story for lower-level students. Finally, pre-teaching some key terms commonly used in discussing fiction might aid students in composing and discussing questions about the story.

Conclusion

While limited in its scope, this reflective action research project revealed some effective ways that Japanese literature in translation can be used as a centerpiece for class discussions about issues of language, identity, and mobility in a Japanese university EFL context. The chosen story featured eccentric but relatable characters, and the arc of their post-adolescent development made for engaging class discussions. Tasking students with the construction of their own discussion questions provided fruitful opportunities for language development, critical and imaginative thinking, and engaging discussion about topics relevant to their lives. Based upon the post-intervention survey and my own reflections on the efficacy of classroom discussions, I have decided to use the story in class in the future with additional scaffolding for students.

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