

Conference report on the sixth LiberLit conference, Meiji Gakuin University

Neil Addison, *Tokyo Woman`s Christian University*

Tara McIlroy, *Kanda University of International Studies*

The 6th Liberlit conference was held at Meiji Gakuin University, Shirokane campus, on February 16th. This year's theme was *Teaching for Transformation* which drew a wide range of presentation topics and was explored by 21 presentations. The purpose of this year's theme was to discuss the processes involved in bringing the often dry language of literary texts alive, and attendees and presenters were asked to consider how best to transform ink spots on the page into 'A-ha' moments of student epiphany which might also transform learners into better, stronger, fuller versions of themselves. Yet again, the quality of the presentations was high, ranging from discussions on how a reader's response to texts changes over time, how a Deleuzian approach can better explicate our understanding of who a literature reader is, an exploration of the relationship between personal experience, empathy and poetry composition, and practical suggestions for testing students' literature comprehension.

Plenary

The plenary talk was titled *Texts as Transformative Tools* by Ira Nadel from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. In this presentation Professor Nadel examined the reading and teaching of literature through a reader response paradigm, and discussed both how lives transform lives and how lives transform texts, asking his audience to consider what a literary text *does* rather than what a text *means*. Approaching literature from the perspective of Stanley Fish's affective stylistics and Jans Hauss' perception theory, Nadel invited the audience to consider literature as a performative art -- a temporal rather than a spatial entity, and employed works of art and imagery to explicate these ideas. Drawing on Samuel Beckett's famous quote "Perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle" from *The Unnamable* (1970), and from other examples such as W.B Yeats' political poem "Easter

1916,” Jean Rhys *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, and the poetry of Milton, Professor Nadel discussed how one’s approach to a text is transformed as one changes, with the meaning of literature always coming into being, or becoming qualified, through the reader’s changing experiential connections to it. Nadel’s talk also examined how texts transform a reader’s awareness of being a reader, discussing how James Joyce’s *Ulysses* contains a number of references to Homer’s *Odyssey* that the reader is meta-aware of while the characters are not, thus illustrating how a text can remind one to remember details and transform one into an active reader. Nadel’s talk thus re-appropriated the authority of the text, emancipated the reader and invited literature teachers and their students to consider themselves as an important transformatory part of the activation process of meaning. Yet, Professor Nadel also acknowledged the dichotomy of university students being often too young to fully understand the wider experiential implications of such texts, while, in relation to an L2 literature reading context, the crucial problems of linguistic and cultural difference were left largely unaddressed.

Selected Presentations

Joff Bradley’s interesting theoretical presentation *On Becoming-Literature* attempted to define the concept of literature as outlined by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. Bradley, who teaches at Teikyo University in Tokyo argued that literature is read by people in a state of in-becoming. Drawing on Leander and Boldt’s research on youth multiliteracies (2013), and the concept of youngsters desiring to *become* something in aggregate rather than *possess* a direct object, Bradley then examined how such desire is constructed in relation to studying literature. He discussed how university students fall in love with the idea of being literature readers more because of their romantic, aggregate associations than because of the texts themselves, yet experience *zerrissenheit*, or torn-apartheness, as such artistic sensibilities fail to be reconciled with the objective world. Finally, in relation to the classroom, Bradley cited the observations of Colombia Professor Inna Semetsky who notes that such frustrational breakdowns, or *crack-ups* are not always negative, and argued that by means of such cracks, or *craquelure*, subjective student thought occurs.

David Kennedy’s presentation on *Transindividuation and Empathy: Becoming Other in Hypomnesic Milieus* examined the effects that information and communication technologies

have had on human society, before turning this focus towards the classroom. Kennedy, who teaches at Toyo University, discussed the concept of *transindividuation*, and the processes of people in society becoming *transindividuals* through connections to each other which are mediated via technology. Kennedy observed that a epigenetic evolution has occurred, where smartphones have changed the way students behave and see the world both in and out of the classroom, and argued that while engagement with literary texts promotes thought and empathy, modern technology obstructs students from being reflective, creative and inventive.

Barnaby Ralph gave a presentation entitled *Transformation and the shifting of the foundations of allusion: Reflections on The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in which he used a 2007, award winning novel as a prism through which to look at literary allusion in the information age. Ralph is interested in literary texts as well as critical theory amongst other academic topics, and his enthusiasm for these wide-ranging fields is tangible. In this highly engaging presentation, participants were invited to consider their own feelings on reading and recognising literary allusion when presented by it. These emotions could range from feeling part of an *inside* group who read and understand literary references through their own knowledge and educational backgrounds, to humiliation and sometimes shame on feeling *outside* understanding and unable to make connections through a lack of knowledge. Using Junot Diaz's novel to illustrate how modern-day references to television, comics and geek culture could be mixed amongst other classical references and literary allusions. Through this Ralph showed that the shifting sands of cultural awareness and understanding make new demands on the reader and can be stimulating for teachers and learners alike. Finally, the presentation also invited participants to consider the positioning of the language learner amongst the context of reading such challenging texts.

Presentations by members of the LiLT SIG

Liberlit was once again strongly represented by members of the LiLT SIG, either as presenters or attendees, which was excellent as it provided members of the SIG a rare opportunity to meet and discuss literature and language teaching face-to-face. One of the afternoon sessions contained three consecutive talks by LiLT SIG members. While we have members based all over Japan, it was a special treat to have visiting LiLT SIG members from as far afield as Kyushu and Shikoku attend the event in Tokyo, and the post-conference party in the evening in the Meguro Tavern.

Here we report on the talks by LiLT SIG members from this year's LiberLit.

In this presentation, *Investigating the Sparkle of the Shining Prince: Some of the Hows and Whys of Teaching Japanese Classics in English Translation in Japan*, Frances Causer, who teaches at Seijo University in Tokyo, approached some well-loved Japanese classics in a course she created about Japanese literature in translation. Her premise is that, regrettably, Japanese classics are not read in enough depth in high school contexts due to examination pressures and the use of pre-defined materials and that this leads to a missed opportunity for cross-cultural communication using literature. Understanding culture and looking at various ways in which meaning can be interpreted with language in order to see how misinterpretations can occur may be an even more important issue in global affairs now than it ever was. With this in mind, Causer led the participants through some challenging excerpts from classic texts in Japanese and in translation, including the Tale of Genji, The Pillow Book and some modern and contemporary classics.

Hugh Nicoll gave a talk entitled *Reading Seventeen Syllables: Learner Understandings of Hisaye Yamamoto's Stories* in which he described some different reactions to works by Japanese-American writer Yamamoto (1921-2011). Nicoll, who teaches at Miyazaki Municipal University in Miyazaki prefecture, talked about his own interest in the author going back to his youth and introduced the author's influence on him personally as well as describing her cross-cultural appeal. Next he described how different groups of students have responded to the themes in Yamamoto's work and some of the challenges which teachers face when looking back retrospectively on a year of teaching. He also described some writings and discussions in class which were drawn from classroom activities and made suggestions for teachers in different contexts.

Neil Conway's presentation on *Content-Validity in Testing English Literature in Japanese University Classes* addressed issues of assessment in relation to literature. Conway, who teaches at Meiji Gakuin University first foregrounded two major forms of assessment, and discussed the merits and demerits of both Criterion Referenced Measurement (CRM) such as TEFL and TOEFL and Norm Referenced Measurement (NRM), in which departments mandate a certain percentage of S, A, B, or C grades. He then differentiated between EAP and literature, making the point that while the former is easier to assess using these models, literature is not.

Conway finally argued for a more holistic, productive form of literary assessment, noting that all students are different, and that any two students don't necessarily have to same type of understanding.

Wendy Jones Nakanishi's presentation on *Accomplishing Transformation by the Use of Authentic Literary Texts in English-Language Classrooms in Japan* discussed the importance of a qualitative, empathetic approach towards introducing students to literature. Nakanishi, who teaches literature at Shikoku Gakuin University, proposed the use of authentic literary texts in English language classrooms in Japan so that students are able to gain access to the full richness and complexity of the English language whilst additionally considering important literary themes related to the human condition. Nakanishi also introduced her recently released literature textbook *Real Reads: An Introduction to Literature* by Perceptia Press (2014), which contains a number of authentic literary texts, author biographies, summaries and Japanese glossaries.

Eucharia Donnery's presentation, *Transformation in A Night in November: Deconstructing Hegemony* approached issues of national identity and nationality through the lens of literature, a perfect vehicle to explore the blurred and sometimes indistinct subtleties of national identity which affect individuals and groups in sometimes surprising ways. First, in clarifying some issues around geographical boundaries and terms used to refer to the British Isles, Great Britain, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Ireland and the United Kingdom, an understanding of the complexities of nationality in these locations was achieved. The setting of the text was a particularly sensitive situation in Northern Ireland in the 1990s involving a soccer game between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Although any discussion of the Self and Other dichotomy in such geo-political situations can potentially set the stage for conflict, the presentation gave some perspective on how prejudice can be overcome and be replaced by tolerance.

Atsushi Iida's talk, *Poetry Writing for Healing: Implications for the Second Language Classroom* described a personal and transformational process in writing poetry in response to a calamitous event. Iida, who currently teaches at Gunma University, was in the U.S. completing his doctoral thesis at the time of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and documented his feelings and responses in the period which followed through poems. From a humanistic perspective and utilizing an autoethnographic approach, Iida analysed his poems and talked

about the expression of emotion through this medium, arguing for effective use of poetry in the L2 language classroom to help writers in L2 settings express feelings more effectively.

Jane Joritz-Nakagawa gave a talk entitled *Poetry, Individual Differences, and Transformation* in which a wide-ranging selection of teaching ideas selected from her extensive knowledge of literature, philosophy and educational theory. One example of theory and practice was the application of Jung's theory of personality types to a selection of poetry activities which could be used in a range of teaching contexts. Moving from general course description to specific examples helped the participants of the session clearly understand the goal of the presentation, which was to illustrate how social change and personal change combine effectively in classroom contexts. The sample activities were well-received by participants and a lively discussion followed the session.

Neil Addison and Neil Conway's presentation *Words of Worth: Enriching EFL Reading With Wordsworth's Sonnets* discussed cultural specificity in L2 poetry teaching, and outlined a qualitative approach which sought to ease this problem. While it was acknowledged that texts are a product of and a negotiated response to cultural time periods and milieus, the presenters discussed how they explicated authentic romantic poetry such as Wordsworth's sonnets through emphasising its thematically universal and stylistic properties. Addison outlined how the landscape art of J.M.W. Turner was used to foreground romantic poetry's thematic focus on nature, before then discussing how challenging adjectival language and poetic structure was scaffolded. Conway then discussed post-reading comparative questionnaire response data, which indicated that students had found these methods accessible and useful.

Kayo Ozawa's presentation on *The Awakening and A Separate Peace through Different Lenses* introduced a course taught at ICU High School in which various forms of critical theory were introduced and applied to the literary texts *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin and *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles. Ozawa discussed how she strove to transform students from passive readers of these authentic texts into more autonomous learners, and how different literary approaches in tandem with the use of multimedia technology were employed to encourage different student responses.

Future directions

More information can be found at <liberlit.com.> In the closing comments at the end of the day, Michael Pronko thanked all literature-related groups for their support and the LiLT SIG was given some publicity time to mention the SIG and invite LiberLit participants to write for our journal. At the end of the conference a new change of venue for 2016 was revealed, and it was announced that the 7th Liberlit conference will be hosted by Neil Addison and Professor Noriyuki Harada at Tokyo Women's Christian University in Suginami-ku.

About the authors

Neil Addison has a BA in English Literature from the University of Kent, an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Southampton, and is currently undertaking his PhD at the University of Birmingham. His research interests reflect his passion for using literature in the language classroom to improve students' critical thinking abilities.

Tara McIlroy is a Co-coordinator of the Literature in Language Teaching SIG. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Birmingham, UK. Her interests include literary reading, investigating uses of creative texts and uses of world literature in the language classroom.