

Literature in the L2 Classroom: Addressing Communicative and Policy Goals

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Abstract

The purpose of language learning is to communicate, yet English education in Japan generally focuses on receptive skills and assessment, rather than on target language production. One way to provide opportunities for learners to convey their ideas in spoken and written modes, while increasing motivation and developing cultural awareness and critical thinking, is to adopt communicative methods for employing literary texts in the foreign language classroom.

After a review of studies on literature in English language teaching, current literature courses at Japanese universities are examined, and recent policy recommendations for change are detailed. A theoretical rationale for using literature in ELT in general and specifically in the Japanese context is presented, and learner attitudes to reading for pleasure are investigated. The paper concludes by considering how communicative goals may be achieved by designing literature courses which engage foreign language learners in interpretation, discussion and creative writing tasks.

Key words: literature courses; policy changes; communicative methodology

The undisputed purpose of language is to communicate with others, and thus “the ultimate goal of language teaching” should be “to develop both the oral and written communication skills of L2 students” (Iida, 2013, p. 5). However, despite frequent calls for change by the Ministry for Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2003; 2013) and by educators within the system, English language teaching (ELT) in Japan continues to focus on accurate memorisation of structures and vocabulary, which restricts communication in the classroom. Such problems have been well documented (in Fraser, 2010; see also Gorsuch, 1998; Lamie, 2005), with frequent reference to the “long-standing frustration over Japanese people’s inability to communicate sufficiently in English, which is shared by learners and teachers” (Sakamoto, 2015, p. 197). Yet, if Japanese learners are to take their place in a globalised world, an ability to interact internationally and interculturally in both speaking and writing is required. Thus, English language teaching in Japan must be open to change, to find ways of enabling learners to put to practical use their store of

English resulting from years of passive L2 learning.

One way to activate this linguistic knowledge is to take the emphasis off language learning *per se*, and to present learners with texts and themes that provoke a genuine reaction and that encourage a real communicative need to respond. Opportunities for such meaningful communication can be provided through innovative teaching techniques, classroom dynamics, and expectations for outcomes of using a source of textual input long available for education – Literature. It is therefore proposed that the potential of this often overlooked source for developing aspects of language, culture, and personal growth (Carter & Long, 1991) as a communicator in a foreign language be more fully explored and exploited in the classroom.

This paper commences with a discussion of studies to date involving literature in ELT. An examination is undertaken of ways in which literature is currently being taught in Japanese universities, then policy recommendations to take effect from this academic year are outlined. A theoretical rationale for using literature is presented before methodological concerns in the Japanese context are considered. The paper concludes by proposing how communicative goals and policy changes might be successfully achieved, illustrated by a brief overview of a current university course designed to develop spoken and written L2 output through the use of literature in English. A companion paper (Fraser, forthcoming) details and exemplifies course content and resulting student creative writing.

Literature in FLT cannot in itself be considered innovative as literary texts have long been studied in foreign language classes. Hence, justification for employing this source of input as a starting point for communicative output is required. The timeless qualities inherent in literature appeal to the universal interest in telling and hearing stories about the human condition acknowledged throughout the history of mankind. Even though these may now be manifested more through films, television, and social media rather than through reading fiction and poetry, the issues, emotions and crises present in literary texts still evoke a response and therefore provide a reason to communicate in a FL class.

Literature in Foreign Language Teaching

The many ways literature has been used in FLT over the years are well documented in reviews of research, classroom practice and materials (see particularly: Carter & Long, 1991; Gilroy & Parkinson, 1996; Hall, 2015a; Iida, 2013; Paran, 2008). Paran (2008) examines studies into areas including classroom interaction, language generated through discussions of literature, and views of teachers and learners on literature in language teaching. However, he emphasizes the need for

principled evidence “to support the claims that literature can contribute to language learning, that learners are motivated and interested in it, and that its study has something unique to contribute to language learning” (Paran, 2008, p. 16). Hall (2015a) presents details of a wide range of studies about literature in ELT in the revised edition of his frequently cited review. He likewise advocates more research to provide a clearer picture of classroom interaction, and to establish a closer link between the use of literature and the oft-claimed gains in L2 ability and cultural understanding, as affective, cultural and psychological arguments cannot just be “taken on trust” (Hall, 2015a, p. 112).

Renewed interest in literature is also apparent in the new companion volume to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (COE, 2018), recognising a role for literature in measures of language ability and therefore for identifying language learning objectives. Three new scales relevant to literature are now included in the expanded descriptors – reading as a leisure activity (p.64); expressing a personal response to (p.116) and analysis and criticism of creative texts (p.117). In addition, there is now a focus on mediation involving collaboration to construct and convey new meaning (p.103) and more detailed reference to creative writing (p.76).

While the use of literary texts in FLT in such contexts as Europe and the Americas is widely documented, (see Hall, 2015a; Paran, 2008), EFL learners in Japan have had more limited exposure to literature in language teaching, and therefore to its purported benefits. Indeed, as a result of recent and current MEXT (2003; 2013) courses of study objectives focusing on developing learners’ communicative abilities, literature has been marginalized (Takahashi, 2015, p. 27). Textbooks for schools have greatly reduced their literary content, and few materials containing literature are published for the university level (Takahashi, 2015, p. 33).

The use of literature in ELT in Japan, particularly at the tertiary level, can offer much scope for innovations in course design and implementation, to develop overall language skills while motivating learners and encouraging active participation in class through this valuable resource. However, in order to contextualise suggestions for course content, classroom practice, and learner outcomes, it is first necessary to examine current uses of literature in university language courses in Japan, and recent national policy recommendations for change.

Literature Courses in Japanese Universities

Undergraduate literature courses offered at Japanese universities range from those for students specialising in English language and literature, to optional courses, to obligatory components of high school English teacher-training programmes. Courses are “designed to expose students to a variety of literary texts and approaches, improve their linguistic and literary

understanding, and instil knowledge of literary history and writers and their works” (Nakamura, 2015, p. 151). Reported methods for teaching literature include close reading of the text to explain details and appreciate themes, with the teacher reading aloud, as in Japanese literature classes (Saito, 2015), and “the verbatim translation of a fragment of a work from English into Japanese” (Teranishi, 2015, p. 168).

The dominant mode of teacher-led lectures in teaching literature, with the traditional view of the teacher as the dispenser of knowledge holds true in many Japanese contexts, in which “students tend to be passive or even bored during the teacher’s talk” (Teranishi, 2015, p. 174). Moreover, the language of instruction and response is invariably Japanese, as in almost all cases courses are conducted by Japanese professors. Overall, the “abiding image” for students is of “tedium, condescension and irrelevance” (Hall, 2015a, p. 126). Indeed, the observation that “[l]iterature easily turns into the study of dates, facts and plot summaries which will not in any obvious way support improved use of language, which is the aim of most students on a language course” (Hall, 2015a, p. 207) is reflected in reports of literature classes in Japan.

To further illustrate the current situation at Japanese universities, I undertook an analysis of twenty *English and American Literature* course syllabuses for the 2017-18 academic year from a random online search, to collate recurring features of content, teaching, student participation, and assessment. Multiple occurrences of such features within the syllabuses are presented in square brackets [], and other information identified is then summarised.

Course content

An examination of these twenty syllabuses revealed that one popular way for universities to structure their courses was to base the whole semester around a single book [10], such as *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925); *Alice in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865); *Richard III* (Shakespeare); *Paradise Lost* (Milton, 1667). Another fairly frequent arrangement was to specify certain themes, and to select extracts of literature related to each theme [5]. For example, to examine gender and race, suggested texts included *The Scarlet Letter* (Hawthorne, 1850) and *Gone with the Wind* (Mitchell, 1939). While others concentrated only on short stories [2], the focus of some courses was not explicitly stated [3].

Teaching

When considering the modes of teaching literature courses, of those specified, lecturing was the most common [12], while some mentioned using DVDs [5]. Although the language of teaching

was only sometimes clearly stated as Japanese [8], because of the ratio of Japanese to native-English speakers (19:1) it could be assumed that classes are more likely to be conducted in the learners' L1.

Student participation

The most frequent tasks for learners were to read, understand, analyse [16] and to translate into Japanese using dictionaries [5]. Written outcomes in the form of reports or essays were expected [12], two of which specified they were to be in English. Although discussion [5] and presentations [3] were listed, only one stated that active participation was needed [1].

Assessment

Evaluation of students was described as based on written reports [8], exams [6], or was not mentioned [5], with one course being assessed by presentations [1]. The language to be used for assessment tasks was not specified.

The emerging picture is that for learners literature courses are predominantly receptive in nature. Teachers appear to present background information and analysis of a single or limited range of literary sources, or at the other extreme, a surface description of a wide range of works impossible to examine in any depth in a single semester, almost exclusively delivered in Japanese. Furthermore, content is typically assessed via exams or reports written in Japanese. When group work is specified, learners are instructed which pages to read, translate or analyse and explain literary and stylistic features, and occasionally mentioned discussions are most likely conducted in their L1. Although original texts are recommended, translations, abridged and annotated versions and simplified graded readers are often solely relied upon. Arguments can be presented for using translated texts for quicker understanding of plots and content, and support for lower-level students, but they do not help with language awareness (Nakamura, 2015, p. 154). As such, literature courses focus predominantly on literary content, and very little language work in L2 is happening.

Although research in this area in Japan remains under-represented, there is evidence in this journal dedicated to the topic of literature in language teaching (LiLT) of an albeit small group of educators actively examining and experimenting with ideas for using literature for both content knowledge and L2 development and practice. In addition, a recent collection of papers (Teranishi, Saito & Wales, 2015) shows inroads have been made into exploiting literature more interactively in the Japanese context. Various activities stemming from literary extracts such as writing ends for stories (Kuze, Ch.12), free translations of Japanese poems (Sakamoto, Ch.13), and book reviews

(Kusanagi, Ch.14), written reflection (Nakamura, Ch.10) and commentary tasks (Sakamoto, Ch.13) undertaken in English are described. However, a reliance on lectures in Japanese is still noted, and discussion in class is rarely specified as in English. Indeed, much of the classroom practice outlined involves extensive reading, and is aimed at very high-level learners. It focuses on literary understanding and stylistic analysis, rather than literary content being a springboard for discussion, expression of opinions and to develop all aspects of communicative competence.

Recent Policy Changes

The foregoing notwithstanding, recent recommendations for change in some Japanese university classes may have a positive effect on how literature is to be taught in the near future. On account of conclusions of a MEXT out-sourced project by Tokyo Gakugei University, (hereafter, Gakugei, 2016), a shift away from traditional methods of teaching literature is intended, at least for the sector of university students aiming to become high school English teachers. This project on considering ways to improve English teachers' language and teaching ability resulted in a document on the core curriculum of English/Foreign Languages for initial teacher training courses in universities (Gakugei, 2016), setting forth recommendations for what should be taught and how under each course. In order to obtain a teaching licence, university students must take four English education courses: English Communication; English Linguistics; English Literature; Understanding Different Cultures.

The general goal for literature courses is that through learning about literature written in English students will improve their ability to express themselves in English, understand the cultures of countries where English is used, and be able to make use of literature in foreign language lessons in junior and senior high schools.

The content and goals for these three areas are specified as:

1. English expressions seen in literary works: Being able to understand various expressions used in literary works.
2. Diverse cultures seen in literary works: Being able to understand the cultures of countries and regions described in the literary works.
3. Main literature written in English: Being able to understand the main literary works written in English (Gakugei, 2016, p. 5).

More specific suggestions for teaching English Literature courses cover not only having students listen to the teacher's lectures, but based on what they have learned, students should have discussions or write an essay, and through such activities expressing themselves with more

perspectives they will be able to learn English. It is desirable to make students think of possibilities for using literature as teaching materials or making students write some literature teaching materials. It is desirable that teachers use some activities that students could use in their own future lessons (Gakugei, 2016, chapter 5, translated).

Despite these general goals for literature teaching styles at university to engage students in activities, creating materials and discussion, specific content goals are receptive in nature, stating only that students are “able to understand” the content. Furthermore, no list of writers and works nor textbooks or materials are specified, and the only sample syllabus – for a children’s literature course – does not outline any activities.

This has resulted in MEXT requesting the renaming of university courses from 英米文学 (British and American Literature) to 英語文学 (Literature in English), and for their syllabuses to reflect these changes in delivery and approach from April 2018. It remains unclear how courses might change to accommodate these recommendations, or how class content will be affected, as no concrete guidelines for what and how educators should teach, nor specific teaching materials have been provided. Moreover, little indication is given on how these students might learn to make their own lessons interactive or to encourage productive skills among their future learners when they themselves become teachers. Nonetheless, by recommending change, MEXT has provided opportunities for innovation in literature teaching.

Theoretical Rationale for using Literature in FLT

It is now necessary to consider how the use of literature in language classes can achieve the goals of fostering the development of communicative competence. Language acquisition is considered to be input-driven, and to take place through exposure to the language, comprehension, and practice (Krashen, 1985). It is also thought to be promoted by activating the syntactic processing involved in production through learner output in the target language (Swain, 1985), which is especially enhanced through interaction and negotiation when a communication problem arises (see Long, 2015). If learners do subconsciously acquire new linguistic forms when they are able to understand input they are exposed to when it is at a similar or slightly higher level than their current ability (Krashen, 1985), literature would seem an ideal source of language for L2 classes. Thus, when planning literature courses and designing appropriate teaching materials, a basis of SLA theory should inform the adoption of elements from a range of inter-related communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches which aim to provide opportunities for encouraging this balance of input, output and interaction among learners.

Ways of structuring activities to maximise communication between learners could be drawn from task-based language teaching (TBLT). “Unfocused tasks,” which “aim to stimulate communicative language use” (Ellis, 2003, p. 16), should be selected to encourage comprehension and production rather than focusing on specific linguistic features. In particular, literature lends itself to “open tasks,” where learners are aware that there is no predetermined outcome or solution (Ellis, 2003, p. 89), and can thus offer their own interpretations of the texts. Following a meaning-based approach in which the teacher does not attempt to control learner output, the tasks should facilitate spontaneous exchanges of meaning. Success is then determined by how effectively learners communicate their ideas even when there are inaccuracies in the L2 produced (Willis & Willis, 2007, p. 4).

When tasks are employed, they also allow for various forms of classroom dynamics beneficial to language acquisition, as learners often work in groups or pairs. The many potential advantages of group work over traditional teacher-centred instruction can include increases in learner output, motivation, independence, and decreased anxiety, all of which encourage learning (Jacobs, 1998). Collaborative learning, with its emphasis on learning outcomes gained through interaction and cooperation with peers, facilitates learner engagement with “more capable others... who provide assistance and guidance” (Oxford, 1997, p. 444). This encompasses Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of “zone of proximal development” in which scaffolding helps learners reach their potential level. Furthermore, by adopting a learner-centred approach, collaborative tasks can provide the social interaction now considered necessary for learner autonomy to be nurtured (Murray, 2014). It is, however, the ways in which learners perform the tasks, not the tasks themselves, that enable opportunities for scaffolding, collaborative dialogue and instructive interaction to arise (Ellis, 2003, p. 183), and thus to ensure learners remain engaged with the tasks, motivating input is required. Whereas CLT activities are sometimes viewed by learners as requiring speaking for the sake of speaking (Ellis, 2003, p. 199), incorporating literature into language teaching can offer interesting and cognitively challenging input to spark motivation and maintain involvement.

By using the target language for both input and learner output, classroom interaction can provide opportunities for developing all four language skills. Tasks related to literary texts such as creative writing and making presentations involve the application of ideas gained through Bloom’s (1956) higher-order thinking skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. What is more, critical thinking about input can be encouraged to raise intercultural awareness by reflection and interpretation in relation to the learners’ own culture (see Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). As such, literature is a particularly appropriate source of materials for university students who already have

some level of general knowledge, learner autonomy, academic interest, and FL skills. However, even though there is a sound rationale for employing literature in the language classroom, there are several systemic issues which may make it difficult to do so in the Japanese ELT context.

Contextual Considerations

Much has been written in both academic publications and the media on the problems faced in English education in Japan, and reasons why Japanese learners generally do not attain high levels of English proficiency, with various suggestions to address these issues being proposed (for a detailed discussion, see Fraser, 2010). The traditional Japanese teacher-fronted, grammar-translation *yakudoku* method long criticized (Gorsuch, 1998) is still prevalent in many educational settings. Recent proposals by MEXT (2003; 2013) and subsequent changes in Courses of Study and textbooks at all school levels recommend solutions by increasing the number of English class hours, focusing more on learner spoken and written output, and providing more comprehensible input by advocating that greater proportions of English lessons be taught through English. The shift in focus from accumulating knowledge to thinking and problem-solving in all subjects is to manifest itself in the next curriculum for Foreign Languages, which is in effect for English. The intention is to create a more equal balance between all four skills, rather than mainly concentrating on receptive reading and listening. Even so, teachers wishing to adopt innovative methods may find resistance to their implementation of communicative classroom practice.

Although MEXT has long emphasised the importance of practical communication ability in an increasingly globalised world (MEXT 2003; 2013; see also Lamie, 2005), realistically, students in Japan have very little communicative need to use English, since almost all have a shared L1, and so any classroom interaction in L2 is artificial. In addition, to be motivated to speak, even in a classroom context, topics and activities must be of interest and relevance to learners. Yet, course books typically contain a similar, narrow range of themes, with activities unlikely to generate discussion (Glasgow & Paller, 2014), while often assuming limited L2 equates with limited cognitive skills, resulting in the inclusion of infantilised input for learner production. Likewise, writing is an overlooked skill, being controlled, modelled and produced at only sentence or paragraph level in English textbooks (Kobayakawa, 2011). To enable learners to communicate meaningfully in both spoken and written modes, more opportunities to express their ideas orally and in cohesive extensive written texts need to be incorporated into the Japanese L2 classroom.

Whereas at the high school level, constraints of class size, examination pressure, and traditional teacher-fronted methods continue to ensure adoption of communicative techniques is

limited, it is at the university level where there is more scope for innovations to develop learners' communication skills. Here, curricula are less fixed, more elective courses are offered, and students may have more specific or practical motivations for acquiring communicative skills. Once the exam barrier has been removed, teachers can be less strict about accuracy, and work towards developing fluency, and putting to use the store of language that university students have passively studied and absorbed through their six-plus years of English education.

To achieve MEXT's, and often learners' personal, goals, teachers need to create opportunities for active participation and L2 production. But, we can't talk if we have nothing to talk about! University students who have had few chances to discuss thought-provoking issues with their peers or attempt to write extended texts in high school English classes, need activities which allow for freedom of expression and to experiment with genres, forms, and content. Therefore, literature, if handled appropriately, is an excellent source of input for learners to interact with, to voice their opinions on, and from which to create original written output.

To Read or Not?

Moreover, nowadays, when young people are thought to read less and few opportunities are available for writing in the Japanese education system, innovative ways to inspire learners to actively engage with texts when reading, and to express themselves creatively in writing should be sought. To ascertain how much of an obstacle this supposed lack of interest in reading may be for teachers using literature in class, a survey was conducted in May 2018 to elicit reading habits and preferences among students at three universities in central Japan (see Appendix), to explore the claim that “[m]ost students read little in either the L1 or the L2 and they do not enjoy reading” (Grabe & Stoller, as cited in Hall, 2015a, p. 86).

In contrast to this statement, of the 237 second-year education, English, and engineering students surveyed, a large proportion like [51%] or very much like [22%] reading in Japanese, and even 35% like reading books in English. However, when asked about frequency of reading for enjoyment, the spread of answers indicated some agreement that “students read little” (Grabe & Stoller, as cited in Hall, 2015a, p. 86). Only 28.7% reported reading often or sometimes, with just 7.6% reading almost every day; and while 52.6% read occasionally or rarely, 12.2% declared that they almost never read for pleasure.

Findings from this research therefore suggest that the problem is not that young people dislike reading, but that they are not doing it very often, perhaps due to other pressures of being a student, or because of technological distractions of modern life. Additionally, although 60.8% of respondents had read books in English, which is perhaps on account of the increased interest in

extensive reading (ER) in ELT, only 7.6% had ever experienced writing stories or poems in English. It is essential, then, that literature be introduced to language learners in ways that will enable oral and written L2 reactions while also encouraging a lasting interest in reading, be it in L1 or L2, long after the classes have finished.

English through Literature

Numerous issues at the macro level in FLT in Japan indicate the need for change in policy, methodology, materials, and classroom implementation. Therefore, to address concerns over how literature is currently taught in Japanese universities, and how more opportunities for communication in class are needed, I created a semester-long course entitled *English through Literature*, which would fulfil university requirements of teaching about literature, while simultaneously developing L2 skills and generating motivation. For reasons of space, only a brief explanation is given here as an illustration of how literature can be incorporated into a communicative approach to language teaching. However, the rationale for designing this course, a detailed description of methodology, course content, text selection, learner reactions, and examples of creative writing produced by participating university students, along with ideas for further development and its relevance for the wider FLT community are all presented in a companion paper (Fraser, forthcoming).

The overall aim of *English through Literature* is to encourage participants to think critically about literary texts and themes, present their views in varied spoken and written modes, raise intercultural awareness, and nurture the desire to read. Based around linguistic, cultural, affective and literary objectives, each component of the course involves theoretical background and contextualisation of a selection of literary input, discussion of content and personal reactions to issues raised in the texts, followed by individual and collaborative writing activities related to and developing from the text types or themes.

The main purpose is therefore to encourage expression of opinions and to provide inspiration for creative writing through reading and reacting to a wide range of poetry, short stories, children's literature, extracts from novels, plays, and diaries, from canonical, modern, and lesser-known sources. In this way, learners are able to expand their literary, cultural, and general knowledge, while activating linguistic skills needed to discuss and write in the target language.

These creative writing tasks take many forms, including: updating, relocating, or changing the viewpoint; creating prequels or sequels; interacting with a character; writing in the style of the literature examined. All written work produced during the course is compiled into an anthology, and

distributed to each class member to form part of their university foreign language learning portfolio.

Concluding Comments

While several obstacles continue to face ELT in Japan, finding ways to motivate learners and encourage L2 communication remain major concerns for educators. Innovative uses of literary texts in English language lessons may provide some solutions, especially at the tertiary level. Furthermore, even though literature has traditionally been viewed as appropriate input for only the highest level learners (Hall, 2015b, p. 19), it can be repositioned so that many types of language students can benefit from its diverse opportunities. For example, to address teacher concerns that literature is inappropriate for non-specialist courses, larger classes, or younger learners, a description of how a literary text can provide the stimulus for a series of lessons at the senior high school level can be found in Fraser (2012), where a play script was adapted to encourage spoken production in a class of 40 students. Yet, although “it is clear that literature does have something very special to offer language learning” (Paran, 2008, p. 70) as it combines attention to meaning with attention to form, and appears to be motivating and engaging, there is still a need for much more research to show the benefits of using literature through “more systematic evaluation of courses, and systematic enquiries into the views of learners” (Paran, 2008, p. 68).

This paper has highlighted the potential for using literature as a stimulus for developing communication abilities of collaborative analysis, discussion, and writing. Through engagement with thought-provoking literary input, learners are motivated to express themselves and exchange views, which maximises opportunities for language practice. Classroom interaction then becomes preparation for actively utilising learners’ L2 resources in future real-life situations. It would therefore be well advised for educators in Japan to be open to innovation in order to realistically enable citizens to pursue their professional and personal goals in a globalised world through English.

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Appendix

Survey: Reading and Literature

1. Do you like reading books?

Very much [] Yes [] Not very much [] No []

2. How often do you read books for enjoyment? Circle a number.

Almost every day = 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0 = never

3. Rank these types of books 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, according to how often you read them:

Textbooks [] Novels [] Poetry [] Comics [] Non-Fiction [] Short Stories []

4. What is your favourite genre of books? (e.g.: Science-Fiction; Romance.....)

5. In your free time, which would you prefer to do? Choose only ONE:

Read a book [] Watch a movie [] Play computer/video games []

6. Do you like reading books in English?

Yes [] No [] If 'No', why not?

7. Have you ever read Novels or Poetry in English?

Yes [] No [] If 'Yes', Where and When did you read them?

8. Have you ever written stories or poems in English?

Yes [] No [] If 'Yes', Where and When did you write them?

[N.B.: *This is the English version of the survey conducted in Japanese in May 2018 on 237 second-year students of Engineering, English, and Education, at three different universities in central Japan.*]