

A conversation with Jane Joritz-Nakagawa

Simon Bibby: *Hi Jane, could you tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, how you came to work in Japan?*

Jane Joritz-Nakagawa: My B.A. is in Creative Writing / Literature with a poetry specialization (Columbia College, Chicago) and my M.A. is in Applied Linguistics (the University of Illinois at Chicago) with a TESOL specialization. I completed my M.A. in spring 1989 and then did a TESOL internship at Harvard in the summer and then moved to Japan just after that in the fall. Some of my students at Harvard were from Japan. One of my students in the ESL Composition course I taught at University of Illinois was from Japan.

When I was an undergrad I was hired as a Writing Tutor which meant one on one courses, often credit bearing, with mostly ESL students (plus a student for whom standard English was a second dialect and one student who was a Fiction writing major who wanted additional feedback on his fiction). I used literary works in my classes. I didn't know how to help my ESL students with their grammar problems yet, but at least, as they told me, I got them excited about English and English literature. One student from Costa Rica told me I was the first person to demonstrate to her the idea that English was actually a beautiful language! I often started our lessons by reading aloud dramatically some sort of creative writing, whether a short story, or creative non-fiction piece etc....

I wanted to help my ESL students more but was inexperienced and untrained at that time. I thought I would study later theoretical linguistics as a graduate student but ended up doing the applied linguistics track with a TESOL speciality because the advisor recommended that to me as being better for a future teaching career (though in fact the course of study

for the applied and theoretical tracks wasn't all that different at that university). As I learned and taught at University of Illinois, at Harvard where I also took some graduate courses, and then as a teacher after moving to Japan, I gradually became competent at helping my students learn what they needed to learn.

When I moved to Japan I thought I might study sociolinguistics in my free time. However, what happened was that I studied Japanese language and culture on my own (I didn't know any Japanese other than a few words; in the U.S. the only language I studied was French), and then educational psychology on my own - I was very serious about wanting to become a good teacher.

I think from childhood I always wanted to be a teacher and a writer.

The experience working with ESL students in Illinois and also the bubble economy in Japan (there were many jobs in 1989 and the 1990s for English teachers here) and other factors made me come to Japan, including enjoying working with Japanese students in Illinois and Massachusetts, knowing ESL teachers in Illinois who had worked in Japan, and also studies about Japanese language and culture (sociolinguistic research I did in Illinois while a student) made me want to come to Japan. At that time, there were also no good ESL positions in Chicago, it was time for me to make a move, to make money (I had school loans) and also I thought living in Japan would help me grow intellectually and emotionally because of the vast differences between Japanese and American culture--I thought learning about Japan first hand would help me expand and mature as a person.

SB: *Can you tell us about your teaching situation - basically, how literature features in your classes?*

JJN: For the past nine years I worked at a national teacher training university in central Japan (Aichi University of Education), but in total my teaching career spans over 20 years. Nearly all or all of the courses I teach in recent years would be called content courses or minimally theme-based. I use poems in any course such as gender and society, American history, etc. but I have also designed and have taught numerous courses that are exclusively poetry; e.g., an introduction to American poetry, an introduction to poetry in English (British, American, etc.), a course in comparative poetry (Japanese poetry plus poetry in English and sometimes other languages), and so on.

At prior positions in Japan I have also used poems as well as creative nonfiction and fiction in courses at a variety of universities to teach writing, in integrated skills language courses, etc. -- pretty much any course-- and taught a course in multicultural literature at a private university. I also taught a graduate course in American literature at a private university in Tokyo not long ago.

So, literature is a sometimes-used material in any course for me, though I also teach literature courses. I have taught required EFL also and in those courses use poetry or stories as an occasional material, as well as other authentic materials such as songs, even at lower levels.

SB: *It's interesting to see that you use a lot of poetry in different types of courses. Thinking practically, how do you 'use' poetry? How do you put together your courses? Suggested lesson activities?*

JJN: If the course is not a poetry course, poetry is simply part of the mixed genre of works that I use to teach the content. I know that students like the variety--to read not just only textbooks or academic works but to read and listen to also songs, poems, creative non-fiction or fiction in the same course, which they then would talk and/or write about. The poem is usually used as reading, writing, listening

and speaking material - all of those and sometimes vocabulary or grammar is taught using the poem as well.

If it is a poetry course, students read (and may read out loud or listen to me read out loud or listen to audio recordings of poets reading -- any combination of those) poems, and discuss their reactions to the poems in groups and also usually in writing in response journals. I teach basic vocabulary for discussing poems -- poem, poet, line, stanza, alliteration, metaphor, prose poem, rhyme, sonnet, etc. -- a lot of technical vocabulary is not really required -- so they can talk and write about the poems. I draw their attention to any features they may not have noticed on their own or in their groups. I encourage students to analyze the words of the poem, without (usually) depending on outside knowledge about the poet or person for example. I also have students write their own poems.

SB: *How have students responded to using poetry in such classes?*

JJN: They like it very much. It is important I think to try to choose a variety of poems though in terms of theme, style, length, cultural background required etc. and consider the linguistic difficulty. As with music, students will have certain tastes so...e.g. if you only used jazz in class, rock fans would object.

SB: *How do you support students' understanding of the language, which I imagine some may find difficult?*

JJN: There are many ways. Choose works that are easier if the students' language level is not high. Choose works that students know in Japanese or present works bilingually or teach vocabulary first. There are actually a lot of good poems that suit a high beginner even. Because I am a poet myself and very well read in poetry, admittedly, it is easy for me to find / come up with appropriate poems, because I've been reading poetry for decades now (it's my favorite reading material!) so I have a catalog in my head so to speak...There is plenty of free poetry online for

the taking also, where all the teacher needs to do is copy and paste into her handout, e.g. at Poets.org, poemhunter.com, The Electronic Poetry Center, famouspoetsandpoems.com, and many other such sites including Wikipedia and others.

As I observe classes being taught by students in area schools (as part of the many duties a teacher working for a national teacher training university has) I've seen poems used successfully even in elementary school. One of the best lessons I've seen by a student teacher was last year. Our student used "renshi" (collaborative poem writing) cooperative learning style to teach 国語 (Japanese as a first language). It was impressively done, the students obviously enjoyed it, and everybody followed, understood and actively participated in the lesson.

I have also been teaching two TESOL methods courses at this university for future language teachers--most will be high school or junior high school teachers of English, some elementary school teachers, and also some 日本語教育 (JSL) majors take the course. Students make sample lessons each week in groups. Some groups have come up with very innovative ideas for using poetry (unprompted by me) with even low level students, such as simple haiku in English written by students in their lesson plans.

SB: How do you assess learning?

JJN: It depends on the course, but generally a kind of portfolio approach. I consider all of the following: attendance and class participation; journal (that would contain weekly homework reactions, and the students' own in-class writings) and in poetry courses I usually assign a final speech and report. Usually that would be on one poet, with each person in the class choosing a different poet so that each speech "teaches" the class about a poet and one (or more, depending on the level of the class) poem by that poet. Final reports and speeches are common actually in most of my courses, including American History and Gender and Society.

SB: Do you have any particular role models with regard to the teaching of literature? Any memorable formative experiences?

JJN: One thing that is interesting perhaps is--when I think of who my role models were or are when I was trying to figure out what kind of teacher I wanted to be as far as pedagogy, two literary people stand out, regardless of the content of what I am teaching (e.g. required EFL or an elective course in gender studies etc.). One is the American poet Paul Hoover whose Advanced Poetry Workshop course I took at Columbia College. Mr. Hoover's course was what we would call student-centered in the TESOL field. Each week the course began with poems the students selected and brought which we read out loud to the class and students commented on. After that Mr. Hoover led us in a writing assignment we usually did alone but later shared with the class and commented on. The key point here is that the students' chosen work and their own works and ideas were the main course content. I more or less follow that concept in most courses I teach - that the students are the main material of the course so to speak.

A second role model was William Covino who taught graduate courses in the Literature department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Although I was a linguistics major, I selected Dr. Covino's course as the sole elective course for my M.A. The name of the course was Philosophies of Composition. Each week we read a challenging book about composition theory by a different author. Students brought summaries and reactions to the weekly reading and the course began by one of us starting the discussion. Dr. Covino did not actually speak much but listened to us. The final paper was: students wrote a dialogue between all the authors we studied. A rule was all authors had to appear equally intelligent so if they were debating composition theory in effect nobody could win the debate. We were to also write in the style of each author each time that author spoke in our dialogue.

Again this course overall would be called student-centered because it depended on the students' ideas. The final paper gave me and all of us a chance to think from the perspective of each author and value her or his ideas (no matter what we thought of their ideas initially--there was one author for example whose ideas I thought were stuffy and elitist and off target--but when writing his part of the dialogue I had to try to get inside his head, and it made me respect him and his ideas! because I had to convey them respectfully and intelligently, forcing me to think beyond my knee-jerk reaction).

Other role models were some high school teachers - two social studies teachers who gave us a lot of free rein in the class (we turned in reaction journals as our main work, which appealed to me), my high school art teacher who again gave us a lot of freedom but was also very supportive of us as people and was caring as well as entertaining, and, at DePaul University (I majored in literature and philosophy at that Chicago university before transferring to Columbia College to become a creative writing major - I enjoyed DePaul but they had no major for creative writing and only one creative writing course so I transferred) were a number of courses where again I would say they were student-centered and that aspect attracted me. One was a course called Reflections on Person (a philosophy course) where instead of a final report or exam we turned in a weekly journal. The lectures were very innovative, mixing up art with philosophy. There were also two Performance of Literature, Performance of Poetry courses that I enjoyed at that university, and a course called Film and Literature that was, as its name implies, multidisciplinary. Those were favorites and role models for me.

What I do now is try to build my courses where students will use various parts of the brain, both the emotional and intellectual sides, emphasize personal expression as well as critical thinking and research, and try to make courses as multidisciplinary and stimulating as possible. I have found courses are richer that way and those courses (the most innovative and student-centered) seem to be the most popular with

my students. For example, I just finished teaching a 16 week long courses in American history where the course readings were academic readings, statistical charts, songs, poems, etc. This course was extremely well received.

On my own in Japan I studied cooperative learning, multiple intelligences, and Jungian psychological types to understand learner differences and also learn how to build high functioning teams in the class for when we do pair and group work. Among others, I attended workshops in the U.S. given by Spencer Kagan and the Johnson brothers (University of Minnesota) to learn cooperative learning better. I had only heard the word "cooperative learning" while in the U.S. but learned what it is and how to do it only after moving to Japan, seeing my students liked to collaborate, and wanting to make it work, so I studied it and perfected my own original approach to it based on seeing what students wanted to do.

In my opinion, literature is great material to use cooperative learning style because there are always going to be different interpretations coming from different students. Students can share their ideas in groups and learn more that way, by learning from each other.

I've just recalled another great teacher/role model, from Columbia College. His name was Randy Albers and he taught a course called Prose Forms. He used to think out loud as a way of modeling critical thinking. I agree that critical thinking skills are important to teach and sometimes imitate his way of teaching -- modeling thinking out loud and making the classroom a place of inquiry. A favorite book on this topic for me is Patricia Cranton's book titled Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning. Reading and writing literary works can play a role in personal transformation, I think, very much so.

SB: We have started up this new group, Literature in Language Teaching. What do you see as the role of the group and its members?

help promote good teaching.

JJN: I hope to learn from the other members about different ways of incorporating literature in the classroom. For some literature has a negative image, as too difficult, irrelevant, etc. or only as material for grammar translation exercises. Our group can change that image to a more positive one! We can

SB: *Thank you for your time and your answers Jane. I am sure that we can all make Literature in Language Teaching a success!*