

A conversation with Wendy Jones Nakanishi

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

Wendy Jones Nakanishi: Because my husband is Japanese, people tend to assume that I came to Japan 'for love'. They wonder whether I met Takehito in Africa, where he worked for three years for the Japanese equivalent of the American Peace Corps, teaching agricultural techniques to farmers in Kenya, or if we got acquainted in America, where I'm from, or in Britain, where I got my master's and my doctorate. The truth is more prosaic. While I was writing my Ph.D. dissertation, worried that there seemed to be no jobs going in my field – 18th-century English literature – in Europe or in the States, I chanced upon a position open to an Edinburgh University graduate, in Shikoku, and applied for and got it. At that time, I had no interest in or knowledge of Japan. I just wanted a job! As for my background, I'm from a tiny town in the northwest corner of Indiana: population five hundred. I got my BA at Indiana University, then spent a year in France, teaching English, and did postgraduate work in Britain.

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

WJN: I try to use literature in classes because I tire of teaching the English that appears in the typical English conversation textbook, which features a cast of bright and cheerful but rather dull young people talking about their families and the films and food they like and about parties. There is no context to these discussions and, for me, at least, no inherent interest in them apart from their constituting examples of English language that can improve my students' basic English listening ability. For me, these simple English conversation textbooks seem to reduce my students to the same level – that of simple-

minded adolescents -- while I find that when I study literature with my students, they are transformed into mature adults, with interesting ideas about life and interesting experiences of their own. I always enjoy reading the responses my students give on final tests, when they relate their own ideas about the setting, plot, characters, theme and tone of the stories we've read in class. Sometimes I find their answers surprisingly perceptive and subtle.

SB: *It appears that most of your university students are lower level language learners. Is there still a place for literature in such language classrooms? What are the particular challenges and how do you address those?*

WJN: Alas, although there are very bright students at Shikoku Gakuin University, perhaps they are the exception rather than the rule. While my students are very pleasant individuals, few have anything approaching English fluency. I do feel, however, that I can use literature in the lower-level classroom with meaningful results. I need to tailor the material to their level, of course, and to inject a large element of 'fun and games' to make it palatable to those whose English ability is low. I use crosswords and word-searches, pair work and group work and, just to make sure everyone is making an effort, often give a short quiz on whatever material we happen to be studying each week.

The materials I use vary according to the class I am teaching. For 'children's literature', I tend to use two or three simple graded readers that have a similar theme that we study, one by one, all together, while examining features characteristic of books for or about children. For a full-year class we have called 'Intensive Individualized Reading,' I use short stories in easy English in the first term, to help students acquire skills that will facilitate their English reading. I teach them, for example, how to guess the meaning

of a word through its context or try to help them to develop the ability to predict the probable course of a story. In the second term of this class I provide a large quantity and variety of graded readers. I want to offer books that might appeal to all my students. The little library I bring to each class meeting includes crime stories, memoirs, biographies, love stories, action stories, thrillers, horror stories, 'true' life stories, and so on. Each student chooses books that interest him and that are written at the level he is capable of. After some warm-up exercises, the students engage in silent reading, using a simple worksheet for the book they have chosen to help them understand the book's meaning or to verify that they have understood it. I discourage use of dictionaries in these classes, asking students to keep a notebook in which to write down any unfamiliar words and, after our meeting, they are supposed to look up and note down their Japanese definitions: hopefully, thereby, expanding their English vocabulary. I also occasionally use poetry in my classes. Students choose a poem, write up a Japanese translation of it, provide copies of both to all their

classmates and, the next week, stage a presentation of the work they have chosen, including information about the author, speculation on the meaning of the poem, and, if possible, some discussion of how the work achieves its effect. Up to now, I have tended to use English and American literature as the material for my reading classes but, given my students' poor level of English and their rather 'parochial' nature, with few of my students ever having ventured beyond Japan, I'm now considering using more Japanese literature translated into English or English stories about Japan as I think my students might just find such materials intrinsically more interesting. Above all, I simply want to get them reading!

SB: Thank you for this interview Wendy, and thank you particularly for providing your entertainingly brutal take on the typical textbook – spot on, I think, in a tragic way. And thanks also for volunteering for the position of SIG Membership Chair. Thank you for your time.