

A conversation with Kayo Ozawa

Simon Bibby: Hello Kayo, can you tell us a little about yourself?

Kayo Ozawa: I came into teaching and using literature in my classes because I loved (and continue to love) reading as an adolescent. I've also read a lot since reading often has a therapeutic effect and I think it has been good for my adjustment back into this country.

SB: Firstly, tricky question for you! Seeking a definition, 'What is literature'?

KO: Literature "is the art embodied in published work", but a literary work does not necessarily need to belong to the established literary canon. The literary work a teacher should use in class should be the authentic version of the text, in terms of style and vocabulary. I have taught authors who are still publishing, for example, Khalad Hosseini, known for his *A Thousand Splendid Suns* and *The Kite Runner* and Lois Lowry, who wrote *The Giver*.

SB: How is literature different from normal "reading"?

KO: This is an issue. Students in my present L3 class are asked to keep a reading journal for the texts that we use. However, literary terminologies (e.g. flat characters, omniscient narration) are taught. Since a lot of our students are returnees, we are trying to teach them in the style that they are familiar with, having been taught in ESL and literature classes abroad, in their local schools, or international schools.

SB: Can you tell us about the students you teach: age, level, and such like?

KO: This class is comprised of returnees, and a few students who have been educated in Japan. The focus of the program for the native/ bilingual

teachers (in contrast to the grammar teachers, who are Japanese) so far in the program has been to retain / maintain the level of the students' English fluency. By the time the students graduate, they tend to go to universities within Japan. Since I teach high school students and not university students (though I do teach TOEIC and a content-based current events class at university), one of our problems seems to be tying in literature with the students' final goal of entering a Japanese university of their choice. Some choose to go to universities with AO (Admissions Office) entrance, where they take an essay test and have interviews. Therefore, we try to incorporate different types of essays, such as argumentative and comparison-contrast.

This year, I teach L3 (the students take a placement test upon entering our school; this is the third level from the top) in the freshman year and L1 in the senior year. The L1s are returnees with native/ near-native abilities.

SB: What texts do you use?

KO: I am using a textbook of short stories for the first time. The textbook has been used for two semesters, in the fall and in the winter. The anthology is called *A World of Fiction: Twenty Timeless Short Stories* edited by Sybil Marcus. Included are complete and unabridged selections by Woody Allen, Kate Chopin, Nadine Gordimer, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Bernard Malamud, Katherine Mansfield, William Maxwell, Frank O'Connor, Grace Paley, Anne Petry, Budd Schulberg, James Thurber, Anne Tyler, Arturo Vivante, Kurt Vonnegut, Alice Walker, Tobias Wolff, Monica Wood, and Virginia Woolf. Out of the twenty stories, I think we will cover twelve. What is great about this textbook is that it has a section on plot, themes, comprehension questions, a writing section, and a debate topic. Most of all, there is a focus on language section, which includes not

only literary elements such as tone, irony, imagery, and oxymorons, but also grammatical elements like conditionals, idioms containing body parts, verbs of movement, and adjectives. Hopefully, this will tie in with what the students are learning in their grammar classes to prepare for university entrance exams. I hope it will also tie in with what they are expected to do at universities (give presentations, read authentic texts, etc.) since there is a huge gap between the skills they need to pass the entrance exams and the skills they need to do well at universities.

SB: *What other texts have you used besides short stories?*

KO: The longer text of *The Giver* was used in the first semester. In addition to writing essays, students have done poster presentations on dystopia/ utopia. In the past, with other texts (e.g. *Catcher in the Rye*), students have made board games, or created timelines (e.g. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*).

SB: *What other types of reading activities do you do in this class?*

KO: Out of personal interest because of the age gap between the students and myself, and because I feel that reading short stories alone is not sufficient English practice for the returnees to retain their English, I've incorporated extensive reading in my classes. Students choose their own books, write reading reports/records, and have to meet a goal (e.g. 300 pages) per semester. I will share what other students have read to increase motivation for the students.

SB: *Do you use the movie version to compare? How?*

KO: I do use movie versions, if I think they are good, or relevant, even if they are not the movie of the text. For example, I've used *Marvin's Room* when teaching Alice Walker's *Everyday Use*. Both texts deal with sibling rivalry. Right now, I'm trying to tie in the movie *Pleasantville* with the teaching of *The Giver*. It is important to use English subtitles and to have focused questions (e.g. 'What does 'color' represent in the movie *Pleasantville* and what does color represent in Lois Lowry's novel?') so that classes do not become simply a form of 'entertainment'.

SB: *I've heard some teachers say that Shakespeare can be too difficult for L2 students. Have you tried to teach Shakespeare?*

KO: I used to teach Shakespeare in my literature classes (e.g., *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Merchant of Venice*) but have moved away from not only because the language is difficult (sometimes students would read the Japanese translation), but because it is hard to get students really interested. However, it is still taught in the upper native/near-native level classes. With Shakespeare, students were asked to act out sections.

SB: *Finally, do you have a particular recommendation for SIG members? Perhaps a book or a poem that really worked, or a lesson activity that really grabbed students...?*

KO: Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous sonnet *Ozymandias* has worked well with any novel dealing with the corruption and fall of power, whether it be Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or of the Taliban in Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. The poem is very famous yet brief and accessible to students, I think.