

Literary texts in ELT in Japan

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In our presentation we began by sharing our views on the current state of literature in MEXT-approved textbook materials in secondary schools. Teaching and learning literature in English has devolved from being a core part of the English language curriculum to near non-existence. It has been argued this is “institutionally supported” as there has been no mention of literature in MEXT’s guidelines since 2003. In Japanese junior and senior high schools there are no compulsory English novels, and English textbooks include few if any short stories, or poetry. In the most recent MEXT reading guidelines for junior high school the words ‘stories’, ‘descriptive texts’, ‘messages’, ‘letters’, ‘written content’, and ‘content’ appear, but there is no reference to texts as being literary or non-literary.

This state of affairs is in sharp contrast to the 1950’s, when reading and appreciating literature was the major aim of English studies. Literature was read for enjoyment, and seen as a way of broadening knowledge beyond local and national boundaries. It was also regarded as a tool to teach students how to improve their academic writing. At that period of time, over one-third of the readings included in

school textbooks were authentic literary texts. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, this has dropped to 5-20% and the texts provided in school textbooks are almost all simplified versions of the original material. Not only do students learn less vocabulary, they also have fewer encounters with words.

For most of the presentation, participants critically examined the physical and internal features of a high school MEXT approved literary text, to evaluate if CLT policies in the national curricula have been put into practice. The beliefs and assumptions of how language is or should be learned were revealed by examining the focus and sequence of the content as well as looking at the language, tasks, and the aims of the materials. In accordance with the MEXT 2013 guidelines participants made recommendations for better approaches to exploit stories contained in the textbooks in order to foster English use, integrate language skills and develop critical thinking.

Further discussion is needed on the use and abuse of literary texts and how to teach literature communicatively.