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EFL context**

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## **What teachers talk about when they talk about poetry: discussing literary texts in the university EFL context**

**Tara McIlroy**

### **Abstract**

Teachers of EFL in Japan are from diverse educational backgrounds but many are not teaching literature. Little research has been conducted on teachers' beliefs and their approaches to literary texts in the language classroom in Japan. This paper introduces a small-scale study looking at literature teaching in the university context using interview data gathered as part of a university project. Six teachers at the same private university in Japan completed a questionnaire and a short interview discussing their use of poetry with learners of English. Comments from the interview data are categorized into three codes related to teachers' reasons for using poetry in class, i.e., 1) cultural development, 2) language development and 3) personal development. The author concludes by raising questions for teachers in the LiLT SIG and suggests areas for further research.

### **Introduction**

In ELT in general and in the EFL context in Japan in particular, literary texts are often absent from curricula at various levels (see Bibby, 2012 and Tatsuki, 2012). The influence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and conversational English as well as teaching to tests such as TOEIC are often cited as reasons. Teachers do not always have the freedom to choose their classroom texts, for example. Reluctance to deviate from textbook material, or lack of interest in literature amongst teachers themselves are also reasons for avoidance of literature. Teachers can also be limited by other factors such as student proficiency level, course goals, or management policy. Nevertheless, some teachers in EFL contexts in Japan are interested in literature and actively seek to introduce literary texts when they are given the opportunity to do so.

In the past Literature meant the literary canon, bringing with it exclusivity and a general belief that to teach literature and to learn it was difficult (perspectives on this are seen in Brumfit & Carter, 1986, Carter & Long, 1991, Showalter, 2003). In this paper, the notion of literature with a small 'l', (McRae, 1991) is used. This means any imaginative text, including a simple nursery rhyme, children's literature, or poem can be considered literature. As such, when teachers are talking about literary texts this definition is broad, and is inclusive rather than being exclusive. By conceptualizing literature as being any creative text, teachers see opportunities for teaching and learning using texts in a range of contexts. This short paper introduces some of the ways in which teachers justify their choices.

When choosing to use literary texts in the language classroom, there can be different reasons for doing so. Literature for cultural development, language development or personal development (Carter & Long, 1991) is referred to in this paper as the culture, language & personal development framework (CLPD) and is used as a beginning framework for discussion of how literary texts can be useful to learners of English. In this short paper a selection of comments from interview data will be discussed within the CLPD framework.

To better understand language teaching and the Japanese context more research is required which looks literary texts in the EFL classroom. The question that this paper aims to address is this: what types of texts do teachers choose for language classes and why? The project described below is part of a larger university project looking at the role of literary and creative texts in the English curriculum.

### **The participants, data collection and data analysis**

The research was conducted in a private university in Chiba, Japan. Students complete a four-year degree program in one of the following three departments: English, International Communication and International Languages and Culture. Some students are studying another foreign language as well as English.

Since the research was exploratory in nature, a non-probability, purposive sampling selection method was used (Dornyei, 2003). The researcher identified participants through an email call to faculty and staff requesting volunteers briefly outlining the research to which six teachers responded. All of those who answered the questionnaire also agreed to the questionnaire and follow-up interview.

The teachers all have MA degrees in Applied Linguistics or a closely related field. A Survey Monkey online questionnaire and follow-up open-ended interview were used for data collection (Appendix A). In this paper, themes from the interview data will be introduced and discussed. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher, and were limited to 10 minutes each. Details about the six participants are included in Appendix B. Two of the respondents discussed previous teaching experience, and one described her teacher-training experience. All participants had chosen to use poetry in their classes through personal interest in poetry. Questions in the interview varied between participants as indicated by the survey responses and the topics. As such the sample is not representative of the general population of language teachers. Given this limitation, the positive learning experiences that the teachers recalled in their own personal learning histories are important because they have resulted in the creation of poetry-inspired lessons and activities in their own teaching in Japan.

Types of classroom task discussed in detail	Examples of texts used by teachers
warm-up free-writes individual and group readings class discussions gap-fill	Shel Silverstein Spike Milligan William Carlos Williams E.E. Cummings Langston Hughes

pronunciation task workshop group activity	Dr Suess Alicia Keys
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Table 1: Selected results from the teacher survey

The interview data were transcribed and then uploaded into a qualitative data analysis software package (HyperResearch) which allows for coding of statements in the data following qualitative research principles (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The coding of the data was done using the three open codes of 1) cultural development 2) language development and 3) personal development. Within this, additional themes emerging from the data were coded also but due to space limitations these are not discussed in the current paper and only a selection of comments from the three larger codes are introduced.

### **Poetry for cultural development**

The most frequently discussed topic is the use of poetry for cultural understanding of a topic. Learning about culture and developing skills in this area means learning to understand differences between cultures, attitudes and values. In a content-based class this also might mean using a theme for discussion, as it would in a general reading or writing class. Poetry tends to be used by teachers to create discussion or to assist deeper cognitive processing of information.

Poetry and cultural development in content-based classes was discussed by several teachers. David has tried both longer texts and poems in the same course with the same learning objectives, and has decided that the poems are more suitable and get better results.

*For me poetry is not an explicit thing in my classroom it's more of a tool that I use for teaching concepts that are difficult to conceptualize in other ways. In my class, I'm teaching about New Zealand, and especially when we do things about Maori connections to land and spirituality it's really, really hard. I introduced a few poems...and it seemed to help students get a deeper understanding of the concept I don't know if it was that they enjoyed the poems more, or that the meaning gave them more of an understanding of the ideas or that it helped them to get the material more closely that way. Certainly....they seemed to click on after using poems and discussing things in small groups.*

In this case the teacher has the impression that different students gain different levels of understanding about a topic from poetry. The idea that greater enjoyment works for some students while others thrive on the complexity of the message appears to suit the content-based class described. In the above example it is also significant that this teacher is not presenting poetry as the end in itself and instead is use as a tool for learning.

Often the teacher has decided to use poems for the purpose of introducing complex ideas and concepts. Several teachers mention the results of using poems in class. For example, in a writing class, Ben comments:

*I've had good feedback from lessons on poetry. I've had students come up to me after class, after struggling with poems and had them saying to me. I didn't understand it, but now I get it and it is so cool. There's that "Aha!" moment, this reveal that goes into it that makes the work somewhat satisfying like a crossword puzzle.*

Overall, teachers using poems for content-based discussions tend to describe the lessons positively. A theme of these comments is that poems enhance understanding and encourage satisfying results through the use of poems.

### **Poetry for language development**

*Poetry is useful because it is very expressive. In a sense, Western people use poetry in the same way that Japanese people use karaoke. That is we really show emotion...*

Emily

In the interviews language development was mentioned in several different circumstances. Language learning goals such as pronunciation, speech rhythm, and fluency were discussed by participants. Fluency was discussed as a learning goal and a number of classroom activities discussed were designed to develop fluency in English. Claire used a fluency task as a warm-up activity with Japanese teachers in a teacher-training context. Andrew talked about fluency in a reading class from listening to poems read aloud.

Some teachers work with language goals very closely, building activities around these specifically. One example from Frances is the use of poems in a beginner's ESL class in a previous teaching context in the US. The idea of using poems read aloud comes from the teacher's own background of reading for enjoyment and reciting poetry for competitions. In the task she describes, learners transcribe their own readings at home and partners comment on their progress and their developments in fluency and pronunciation. Through using simple poems such as Shel Silverstein children's poems, learning goals such as fluency development can be promoted positively. Frances talks about language goals and their relation to the overall aims of the course:

*We tend to focus on language goals since that is what the course required and we focused on pronunciation, fluency and so on. It was amazing to see how poetry was such a short way to achieve those learning goals in a fun way.*

In the university setting, Emily has used poetry for language learning goals in a Freshman class. Spike Milligan poetry was used for its fluid rhythm and other language features which encouraged playful group readings and practice through re-reading in a warm-up activity. Pronunciation strategies and learning about improving pronunciation are the overall goals of the unit of study as Emily describes here:

*Different types of pronunciation area were already being used in class for language learning goals. Rhythm, linking and other ways of looking at pronunciation. In the Spike Milligan poem each line needs to have a rhythm, and we made a reading activity where they had to clap along as they read the poem in time. They were laughing, they were taking turns, they were getting better, and encouraging each other. In that sense the activity worked really well for the goals of the class.*

In these language activities teachers express satisfaction at the balance between learning goals and enjoyment through using poetry in language learning activities while also noticing positive student reactions.

### **Poetry for personal development**

In the CLPD framework, personal development can be conceptualized in a variety of ways. For example, personal development can be seen as individual progression towards learning goals through use of skills in the target language. It also means the willingness of learners to engage with lessons, texts and each other. As well as this, personal development can additionally mean learner development outside the classroom. Essentially, if the learner leaves the lesson feeling more confident, satisfied and encouraged by the lesson, then personal development has been encouraged in that lesson. Frances comments:

*Oftentimes we [the teachers] give people the impression that you are not a reader unless you read novels, or read the newspaper. Poetry means also to see that this poet has created this one moment, and that it is so open to interpretation.*

Teachers describe their use of poetry to encourage student engagement and learner development within this code of personal development. Particularly at the start of a lesson the use of a poem to build classroom atmosphere and create discussion was commented on. Warm up activities seen as important at the university level, since students do not always know their classmates at the beginning of the course of study. Warm-up activities had the additional feature of provoking reaction and allowing for multiple perspectives.

Ben commented that by allowing multiple interpretations of a text that other skills are developed also:

*I have used group work and that raises the expectations of the individual. I have also been surprised by students as well, since they help me learn new things about the texts also. It's not like I come into the classroom with all the answers and explanations. Students oftentimes see things in a different way and those are great moments in the class.*

The aim of using a poem to gather interest does not mean that all students are expected to like a poem. Andrew suggests that other responses are equally important:

*Even if they don't enjoy it I think that s a valuable reaction. What I would be displeased with is no reaction. What is also as valid is I hate that poem. I'm more worried if they say I don t care .*

Overall the idea of student response to a text is seen as important. Selection of classroom material is closely linked to the goal of personal development, as Ben suggests:

*Thinking of subject matter that 30 students would agree on is not easy to do, and so poetry allows for the multiple understandings that a text like this allows. Not everyone is going to care. I don't feel that I should need to fight with the students to get them to access the material. I think it speaks larger to any content-based curriculum and that one of the selling points of any subject-based curriculum is that students want to learn the subject matter and they want to use the language they are learning to access it.*

Some teachers feel strongly that what they are doing with literature and poetry is important to students in helping them respond to difficult concepts. This response, again from Ben, looks to goals beyond the text, and the classroom:

*I genuinely believe that the best elements of literature are the themes that transcend time and place and that the themes in good literature are about a shared human experience. We can read a poem about life from North America, or China, from 1600 or from 2011 and there s something that we have done or something that we are doing that connects us. It may be able to touch us or affect us or we may be able to see something in ourselves, and a thing that is difficult to put into words may become less difficult to articulate.*

Although teachers are talking about the everyday occurrence of teaching general reading and writing classes there is a sense that poetry is adding something additional to the overall experience of learning. In expressing their views in this way, teaching and experiencing language learning takes on a more substantial role.

### **Conclusions and future directions**

This study attempted to tackle the question 'What types of texts to teachers choose for language classes and why?' and used the CLPD framework to categorize interview responses. As a framework for

analyzing the data, the CLPD model begins to highlight the different ways in which teachers view poetry in the language classroom. However, additional sub-categories or new descriptors are required for more detailed analysis. Further research is still required to find out how and in what ways literature is being used in the language classroom at different levels and in different contexts.

Not all teachers in all settings want to take on what poetry teachers enjoy teaching. Teachers in this study repeatedly express the view that poetry should be chosen very carefully and there is a time and place for poetry in language classes. In general, teachers interviewed here would not recommend literature in every EFL class. However, they tended to agree that poetry and creative texts had such potential for language teaching and learning that they should not be absent from language curricula. More research is required to explore the potential for literature (with a small 'l') in different teaching contexts which further the learning goals of Japanese learners of English.

Finally, teachers choosing to use poetry articulate strong beliefs about using literary, creative ambiguous texts with learners. Ben was particularly interested in the value of literature for not only the development of language skills but also for the cultural and personal development of the learner. The use of literature is not simply for the purpose of meeting one aspect of the CLPD framework, but instead is for all areas simultaneously.

*It's not about translating, it's about interpreting. That skill is about using language. It's not about being in a conversation with a foreigner and being able to simply translate what they are saying, but it's about being able to understand and have a sense of what they mean.*

These comments suggest real and tangible benefits for teachers and learners when poetry is brought into the language classroom, and, essentially, what happens outside the classroom too. Just how these fit together should be explored by additional research in this field for the benefit of students and teachers alike.

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**Appendix A: SurveyMonkey questionnaire**

- 1 What department are you teaching in?
- 2 Are you teaching a content-based Eiso class using poetry? Yes/No
- 3 What types of classes have you used poetry with?
  - reading
  - writing
  - speaking & listening
  - other (please give details)
- 4 Which of the following activities have you tried in class using poetry? (check all that apply)
  - Warm ups
  - Listening activities
  - Projects
  - Gap Fill
  - Split story

- Reading activities
  - Pronunciation practice
  - Creative writing
  - Personal/exploratory writing
  - Other (please comment)
  - 5 In what way(s) have you used poetry in class? Please describe this briefly.
  - 6 Which poet(s) have you used?
  - 7 Describe a lesson activity that you have used. What was successful about the lesson or activity?
  - 8 What was unsuccessful about the lesson (if anything)?
- \*Would you be prepared to talk further about your uses of poetry in a short interview?\*

Appendix B: details about participants.

Teacher	Poetry classes and topics covered in interview
Andrew	Has used poetry in university level reading classes. Successfully used poetry and songs for warm-up activities in the university setting.
Ben	Has taught academic writing classes. Uses poetry for free-writing activities, along with art work. Talked about poetry as a tool for teaching a variety of skills.
Claire	Has used poetry in teacher-training workshops. Talked about using nursery rhymes in workshops to highlight rhythm and pronunciation patterns in English.
David	Has taught a content-based class on New Zealand in university in Japan. Talked about cultural content and poetry in EFL classes.
Emily	Has taught poetry in a variety of settings. Talked about being interested in poetry and motivation and poetry for language learning.
Frances	Has taught poetry to beginning level classes in the US. Talked about personal experiences of poetry in high school and poetry activities for pronunciation.

\*All names are pseudonyms