

## Encouraging Spoken and Written Output: *English through Literature*

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### Abstract

Educators are constantly seeking effective classroom methods and materials to enable language learners to make active use of their L2 knowledge in order to develop their communicative competence. In this paper, it is proposed that literary input can encourage both spoken and written production through involvement with texts, expression of personal reactions to content, and formulation of written responses to themes. Ways to achieve this are demonstrated by using extracts of literature in English as the basis of communicative tasks involving discussion and individual or collaborative creative writing extension work to develop linguistic, literary, intercultural and creative skills.

This paper details the course design process including the setting of objectives, the methodological choices and selection of texts for a semester-long *English through Literature* course, and its implementation is exemplified by a lesson plan for one of the poetry components. Samples of learners' creative writing relating to this literary input are then presented. Post-course participant evaluations provide evidence of positive reactions to the content and activities, perceived improvement in all L2 skill areas, and suggest continued interest in reading literature.

Although illustrated for the Japanese university context, the ideas and methodology described have relevance for wider foreign and first language educational settings, and provide potential inspiration for teacher-training purposes.

*Keywords:* literary input; course design and evaluation; creative writing.

If language learning is to enable communication, then language teaching must encompass both linguistic input and activities for output to allow learners to practise their communicative skills in meaningful contexts. Thus, as well as increasing their grammatical and lexical repertoire, language learners need to employ this knowledge to participate in interaction in the target language, and be motivated to express their own ideas and opinions. Utilising literature in foreign language teaching (FLT) can provide such opportunities to develop each of the above aspects, while cognitively and emotionally engaging the learners with its content.

Continuing from the discussion and rationale for the use of literature in language teaching, the contextual issues relating to adopting communicative approaches in ELT in Japan, and an analysis of current L2 literature courses in Japanese universities presented in Fraser (2018), this paper details the design, implementation and evaluation of a literature course which aims to maximise the spoken and written output of its participants. It is hoped that the discussion below of one course entitled *English through Literature* at one Japanese university has relevance for educators in international contexts looking for new ways to develop overall language skills while motivating learners and encouraging active participation in class through exploring the valuable resource of Literature. Although illustrated here for tertiary-level English classes, with appropriate selection of textual input and language scaffolding, the methodology and activity types are equally adaptable for implementation at other levels of foreign or first language education, as well as for teacher-training purposes.

The course design takes into account the recent resurgence in interest in literature apparent in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (COE, 2018), in which expanded descriptors for measuring language learning now include three new scales relevant to literature. As with all course planning and materials writing, national, regional or departmental curricular constraints cannot be overlooked, and thus this example specific to the Japanese context also accommodates recent modifications to guidelines for teaching literature at universities resulting from a Ministry of Education, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) out-sourced project by Tokyo Gakugei University (Gakugei, 2016). As literature is one of four compulsory university initial-teacher-training courses for obtaining a licence to teach English in high schools, recommendations for ways to improve future teachers' language ability and classroom practice are made. Suggestions include activities encouraging university students to express themselves through discussions and essay writing, to understand cultural aspects of the texts, and to consider how they might incorporate literature into their own lessons if they become teachers. From April 2018, MEXT has renamed literature courses as 英語文学 (Literature in English), instead of 英米文学 (British and American Literature), and requests such changes in teaching approaches and learning activities be reflected in university syllabuses.

Instead of simply presenting here a description of classroom practice, this paper offers a timely example of how the new MEXT requirements can be interpreted in specific initial-teacher-training and general university courses in Japan. For teachers in other settings, it also provides an illustration of how similar proposals could be realised and implemented through incorporating

productive skills into interactive tasks based on literary texts by exemplifying ways to make literature in wider FLT contexts innovative and to simultaneously attain various goals for language development, literary understanding and cultural awareness.

### **The Context**

The course (outlined below) was designed as part of the English curriculum at a small private women's university in central Japan. As English Literature is a component of the English core curriculum for students wishing to obtain a licence to teach in junior and senior high schools upon graduation, the university offers two elective Literature courses: 英米文学 I, conducted predominantly in Japanese, and 英米文学II, my course. Course II is open to all 3rd- and 4th-year students, and having taken Course I is not a prerequisite. However, for students seeking a teaching license, it is compulsory to take at least one English Literature course. The course comprises 16x90-minute sessions in the spring semester. Participants are English or psychology majors, typically in their very early 20s, with an occasional mature student, several with experience of studying or travelling abroad, mostly motivated to communicate in English, and within the 450-800 range on the TOEIC test. Class sizes are, however, fairly small – 6 to 12 students – because of credit requirements and timetabling clashes, and possibly due also to frequently-voiced views that reading literature is difficult and boring.

### **The Course Design Process**

When initially creating the course, my challenge was to fulfil university requirements of teaching knowledge about literature, while developing overall L2 skills through encouraging learners to think and present their views, nurturing motivation and the desire to read. Several factors were therefore to be addressed in the design process. As with any course design, whether adhering to specific curricular constraints, or as in my case being allowed virtually free rein on content, the first stage is to establish what learners should achieve, and so the following objectives were formulated.

### **Objectives**

The purpose of *English through Literature* is to encourage expression of opinions, provide inspiration for creative writing related to the literary input, raise intercultural awareness, and deepen critical thinking through language analysis and discussion of literature in English, resulting in the

following four objectives:

- (a) Linguistic: to develop abilities in discussion and written expression and to expand vocabulary through integration of language skills.
- (b) Cultural: to appreciate different viewpoints and social contexts presented in the texts.
- (c) Affective: to evaluate critically, formulate and exchange personal responses to issues, and to foster interest in literature and reading.
- (d) Literary: to become familiarised with various genres of literature written in English, and literary techniques.

In order for learners to achieve these objectives, several decisions had to be taken regarding literary content and classroom methodology.

### **Literary Content**

To ensure no overlap with 英米文学 I, an examination of its syllabus revealed an exclusive focus on American short stories, thereby enabling me to cover a range of modern, lesser-known and regional British works as well as canonical texts in English. Whereas many literature courses rely on abridged versions and translations into the learners' L1, the decision was taken to work with authentic texts only, as simplified texts are "denuded of depth because the cultural content is often diminished and trivialized" and they "devalue the literary nature of the text" (Carroli, 2008, p. 11). Even though the original language may be complex, it reflects the writers' intentions, themes, and the social, cultural and historical contexts of the works (Teranishi, 2015, p. 170).

Consideration of the type of texts and themes to include in the course reflected recurring suggestions (Carter & Long, 1991; Lazar, 1993) for how L2 acquisition can be facilitated, categorised here into the following four conditions: (i) genres and themes are relevant and interesting to learners (ii) texts are at appropriate linguistic levels for students (iii) length of texts is appropriate (iv) text style and cultural content are familiar to learners. While advocating exposing learners to a variety of genres, selecting themes that have particular relevance for the participants is essential. Thus, for the specified humanities, education and psychology students often with interest in overseas travel, I include themes of love, education, culture clashes, and social problems, in accordance with (i). Following (iii), I present short extracts which are manageable in class, as texts requiring a lot of time to read reduce interaction opportunities. In contrast to (ii), however, I do include some linguistically difficult texts, as with appropriate scaffolding and multimodal support, they can offer richer input and more cognitive involvement. Likewise for (iv), it is sometimes

beneficial to take learners out of familiar zones, to challenge their ideas, to think beyond the known through examination of, for example, war poetry and diary entries written under extreme conditions.

A wide range of literary genres that includes poetry, short stories, novels, drama, letters, diaries, folk tales, and children's literature are therefore explored to enable learners to think, express their ideas in English through discussion and writing by working individually and collaboratively using whatever linguistic resources and communication strategies are available to them, including their L1 where needed, to address the above-stated course objectives. The exact selection of texts each year is, however, made in accordance with the specific levels, interests and personalities of the participants. Although resource books for teaching literature in language classes are available (e.g.: Collie & Slater, 1987; Duff & Maley, 1990/2007; Lazar, 1993) I prefer to select literary texts which my learners should be inspired by or relate to, covering works highly dependent on historical and social contexts, of cross-curricular interest and relevance, containing moments of drama or crisis in the narrative and illustrative of particular literary styles and techniques. Activity types in accordance with the following methodological basis are then devised.

## **Methodology**

The initial methodological design drew on my previous experiences of teaching literature to multilingual groups of mostly European students on teacher-training courses at a UK university. The central point was that the literature was a vehicle for learners to develop all four L2 skills, vocabulary acquisition and cultural awareness, while thinking critically and imaginatively, and participating actively through small-group collaboration. This was achieved through analysis, personal response and creative interaction with the texts in group discussion and written extensions. Materials development and lesson planning appropriate to the participants' own classroom contexts and micro-teaching thereof were also undertaken. Stylistic analysis of literary language, academically agreed interpretations, and historical and social contextualisations of the texts were also incorporated. However, when adapting such courses for the Japanese context, much more scaffolding was necessary in terms of both language and conceptualisation, as those for whom the methodology and activity types were originally designed invariably had a deeper background knowledge of literature in English and a higher level of English language ability.

To facilitate this, materials were substantially adapted and reinforced through multimodal input. Support through paraphrase of complex texts alongside the original, modern equivalents of archaic language, and visuals aimed to reduce reliance on dictionaries and maintain learner involvement even with challenging texts. Expectations for spoken and written output were

modified, in that a policy of ‘no wrong answers’ was adopted, and that use of L1 had its place in initial group discussions of reactions and formulating ideas, but that through peer scaffolding, plenary reporting was to be in English. Likewise, expectations for written work focused more on content than linguistic accuracy in order to engage learners’ personal reactions and creativity. One main feature of the original courses was that all input and discussion was conducted in English, it being the lingua franca of all participants. The decision to continue this format and have a literature course taught almost exclusively in English, and by a native English speaker, was in itself innovative within a Japanese university context, but could offer many linguistic and cultural opportunities for these learners.

### **Course Content**

In this course, in addition to general L2 improvement, learners develop skills of interpretation and appreciation of a range of genres of literature in English. In each session, as well as *reading* small amounts to avoid overloading and demotivation, students *listen* to the teacher, some recordings, film clips, and their classmates, *discuss* the texts themselves and their ideas related to and developed from them, and then *write* in L2. The purpose of the writing in this course is not sentence-level and factual accuracy but creative writing as an extension of the literary input and discussion. Creative writing tasks, undertaken collaboratively or alone, include responses to the texts, and adaptations by “writing in the style of...”, extending, updating, and genre changing. Texts are exploited both for reader responses and to raise awareness of different styles of writing, such as comparing Japanese and English poetry, or traditional structured verse and free-form poetry. To help with understanding, extracts are contextualised historically and regionally, and some literary theory is introduced, which can complement what students may have learned previously in Japanese literature classes. Assessment is based on active participation in class discussions and writing tasks. Also, participants have a choice of either writing a book review and making a presentation about it, or preparing materials and a lesson plan based on literature then peer-teaching their classmates, who have the dual purpose of experiencing the activities in student mode, then offering feedback in L1 as potential teachers. To enable revisions to the content, and for research purposes, participants are asked in the final session to provide feedback on the course, written in either Japanese or English.

Each component of *English through Literature* is built around the following process:

- (1) Interpretation of a text – to elicit initial ideas and expectations of content from a theme, title or short extract.
- (2) Interaction with the text – to discuss and compare personal impressions and reactions to content,

themes and characters.

(3) Theoretical analysis – to explore the social and cultural contexts and linguistic features.

(4) Creative writing in response to the text – to imagine the next stage or ending of the text; to present the story from a different viewpoint; to update or relocate the content to a different context; to adapt the content for a different audience; to directly interact with the protagonist in the original text; to imitate a particular literary style.

During the course, students typically create 10-12 pieces of writing, either individually or collaboratively. All contributions become in effect a portfolio of students' work, as they are collected into an anthology, and distributed to participants. Thus, they can see their own development in print, and can enjoy reading the work of others, allowing them to benefit from their peers' imaginative ideas and creative and individual use of English. In the spirit of 'no wrong answers' specified in the first session of the course, these creative contributions are not corrected to the extent that work usually is in other writing-focused classes. Instead, editing of obvious grammatical problems impinging on meaning and discussion with individual students to negotiate the meaning of any incomprehensible expressions are undertaken prior to compiling their book, in order to retain the learners' original intentions and voice.

The content and procedure for implementation of one example course component is now outlined.

### **Example component – Poetry**

As the initial session of the spring semester, a familiar topic and literary format are selected as the focus, to ease conceptualisation.

1. Introduction: Show photo of trees, flowers, sky scene [= spring in UK]. Elicit ideas and vocabulary of what students *see* and *feel*.
2. Input (i): Students hear then read an English spring poem. Discuss images and impressions of context, writer, age of poem, style.
3. Teacher explains form, poetic devices, imagery of poem. Distribute background information in Japanese on the poem, writer, and style at end of session.
4. Elicit students' images of spring [= spring in Japan].
5. Input (ii): Students in 3 groups (As) (Bs) (Cs). Discuss a given poem – content, images, ideas, language, feelings. Speculate where/when written; gender/age of writer?
6. Regroup (ABC) (ABC). Students talk about their poems, but do not show them. Then, comparisons of students' ideas in plenary.

7. Teacher explains poems ABC are all translations of one Japanese poem. Discuss similarities and differences. Elicit expectations of Japanese poems: form, imagery. Compare with a typical poem in English (steps 2, 3).

8. Input (iii): Write Japanese poem on board; elicit literal translation:

朝の月桜にゆるる風もなし

*Asa no tsuki sakura ni yururu kaze mo nashi*

Morning of moon cherry blossoms in/around shaking wind also none

This creates a poetic image in Japanese minds, but not a poem in western terms. How can students make it more understandable?

9. Creative writing: Students create poems in English, incorporating, or based on some of, the basic elements from this Japanese poem and their own images of spring (from step 4). Collect extracts to include in class Anthology of students' creative writing.

Sources of literary input:

(i) "Daffodils" 1<sup>st</sup> verse (William Wordsworth, 1770-1850)

(ii) Three English translations of a Japanese poem by Lady Sarashina (1042)

(iii) Haiku by Shoshu (Shoji Osada, c1870-1940)

The resulting creative writing portfolios emphasise the course's potential for the development of language skills and learner motivation as participants react to issues raised in the literary texts and feel a communicative need to exchange views, and therefore to actively utilise their knowledge of English.

### **Examples of learners' creative writing**

As an illustration of the creativity of learner output, some spring poems written by participants based on the haiku in the example session described above are now presented. It is interesting to note the range of expressions employed when given free rein, and the variation in that while some learners closely followed the imagery and form of the Japanese (e.g., i), others were inspired to move further away from the original (e.g., ii), and bring in a more personal focus (iii; iv; vi). Others included poetic devices discussed in the class, such as alliteration (ii), simile (vii) and personification (iv; v), and all create a lasting impression on the reader through their choice of words and images:

(i)  
The moon at dawn  
No breeze  
To swing the cherry blossom  
The air is still and quiet

(ii)  
It was a world without colour  
When the mild and kind wind blows  
All at once, the buds begin to  
Bloom and flutter  
It is a world full of colour

(iii)  
Spring sun  
It wakes me up  
New world waiting for me

(iv)  
The sun is smiling  
Dancing flowers and leaves  
Singing birds  
Bright, warm, comfortable  
I was pushed back by a gentle breeze  
Start running with this wind  
Go to my dream  
My future now begins

(v)  
When I went through  
By the little cherry blossom tree  
She danced with my wind  
Under the feint moon  
In the morning

(vi)  
One lonely morning  
The moon cut through the darkness  
When sunlight reflected  
Dancing cherry blossoms  
The flowers changed countless colours  
- Like my heart  
After a while  
The wind stopped  
The world was filled with silence  
The past called to me, "Go back"

(vii)  
The moon is floating  
In the morning mist  
And cherry blossoms  
Are melting into the sky  
Like butterflies  
Is it a dream or Heaven?

### Evaluation of the Course

The success of *English through Literature* can be evaluated based on in-class observation of the learners' participation and reactions, creative and linguistic merits of their written output, and on qualitative data obtained from unstructured post-course surveys in which 36 participants over the past five years wrote their own impressions of the classes. This evidence is presented in the form of tabulated occurrences (*numbers*) and individual "*quotes*." Firstly, the extent to which the course objectives were achieved is assessed, then some general impressions are discussed.

#### (a) Linguistic

The quantity of output in English noted in the amount of talking time and quality of written work generated through student-centred activities suggests that linguistic gains were being made. Moreover, the range of expressions employed when the focus was on meaning to explore their own ideas rather than form when writing suggests that "creative writing activities can benefit second

language development as well as wider educational aims” (Hall, 2015b, p. 17).

Learner feedback underlined belief that the course had improved their English ability in general: *yes (24); a little (6); no (1); not mentioned (4)*; with areas of improvement identified as: *speaking (10); writing (7); vocabulary (5); reading (4); listening (4); grammar (3); output (1); creative thoughts/imagination (7); getting ideas across (2); understanding (4); courage (1)*. While some commented on specific skills: “*feel able to express myself more after this course*”; “*can read books more easily now*”; “*various types of literature will help me to write on my own*”; several suggested the teaching style of being *all in English (10)* and “*many opportunities for writing*” was beneficial: “*we have to speak in English, so I speak better than before*”; “*all skills improved because almost all is in English.*”

#### (b) Cultural

From learner reactions to the texts, there is evidence of reassessing personal experiences and impressions of other cultures and of their own in light of themes arising in the literature, such as spring (in the poetry component exemplified in this paper), family responsibilities (in a short-story component based on James Joyce’s *Eveline*), or the most significant events or phases in one’s life (in a drama component based on Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* Act II sc. vii). Exploration of intercultural issues is further exemplified in creative writing, by participants choosing to write from a non-Japanese viewpoint in diary extracts, or by transposing the protagonists into situations involving issues such as intercultural marriage or studying abroad when extending storylines or updating fairy tales. One student noted that “*Literature is an opportunity to learn history, culture and eras. That’s very interesting for me.*”

#### (c) Affective

Learner engagement may be due to the “active task design” of the course, which “ensures that group work is scaffolded and purposeful and that groups are kept “on task”” (Paran, 2008, p. 29). Although several students found the course *difficult (15)* or *so-so (6)*, interest seemed very high: *enjoyable (26); interesting (17); fun (8)*, with very low absenteeism, and participants enjoyed *working together (13)* and *making stories in groups (5)*. The ‘no wrong answers’ policy adopted in class based on the belief that “the resources students bring to their studies are to be valued and built on rather than ignored or deprecated” (Hall, 2015a, p. 50) may also enable learners to contribute and share opinions, as they did not feel the pressure to be accurate: “*had problems with grammar, but now not worried.*”

In contrast to negative views on reading expressed in a first-day writing task, an enthusiastic reaction emerges in post-course feedback: *Want to read more books in English now (25); more interested in English literature now (13)*. Although some were *already interested in English literature (5)* and *like reading novels (6)*, others now want to read short/easy/long books (4); want to read books *classmates recommended (2)*, or commented that “*This class taught me the fun of reading*”; “*I thought reading Literature was difficult, but this class changed my mind.*”

#### (d) Literary

Whereas many students stated that they had not read much literature before in L2: *first time to read English literature (3)*, or even in L1, and expressed little interest or knowledge of literature in a first-day discussion activity, corroborating conclusions that “most students read little in either the L1 or the L2 and they do not enjoy reading” (Grabe & Stoller in Hall, 2015a, p. 86), a positive shift in attitudes is apparent over the course: *enjoyed understanding about stories and characters (13); liked everything (13); in particular poems (8); fairy tales (6)*. Expectations also changed: *expected literature to be difficult and boring (5); difficult to write/understand poems (5); “hadn’t written poems before, but really fun.”*

Understanding of literary techniques and genres was demonstrated in their written work in, for example, using appropriate authorial voice and language features to contextualise the supposed diarist (e.g.: writing from the viewpoint of a well-known American singer, or a 19<sup>th</sup> century English lady), and retaining all structural and thematic elements of fairy tales in their updated versions (e.g., a modern-day *Beauty and the Beast* involving cosmetic surgery, or incorporating a make-over and college dance into a Japanese *Cinderella*).

Positive outcomes noticed in classwork include active participation in group/pair work, where students seem absorbed in the texts and activities, eager to contribute their ideas, and to listen and help others to verbalise their responses. Overall, a very high level of enthusiasm in class and engagement with materials and tasks is noted as compared with observing the same learners in other less student-centred classroom contexts. Indeed, the transition from teacher-directed learning to student-directed learning in this course appears to encourage “improvements in language fluency and communicative competence, and raises awareness of other people” (Kusanagi, 2015, p. 226), while suggesting that student-centred learning “is a significant factor in motivating students” (Sugimura, 2015, p. 248). There is also evidence that the diversity in levels and backgrounds among typical course participants provides opportunities for exchanging and learning from experiences and viewpoints, as well as scope for L2 scaffolding. Less reliance on dictionaries

was noted, and collaboration in group/class discussion and writing tasks encouraged students to contribute their own varied background knowledge, experiences and ideas to explore meanings in texts, rather than passively awaiting the ‘correct’ interpretation from the teacher. Thus, whereas Hall (2015a, p. 87) states that “many language students are relatively unconvinced of the point or value of literature”, results of my small-scale post-course surveys suggest that many appreciated the opportunities to read and discuss literary texts, and recognised that their English had improved in various ways through such a course.

Despite the mix of year groups, majors, and life experiences, class cohesion is usually apparent, with a willingness to communicate and work collaboratively with all members, and to provide scaffolding in both language and ideas to those in more need of support.

There is evidence that learners are no longer reticent about expressing opinions and volunteering answers, but this may be equally due to class size. In very small classes, it is easy to identify when learners are struggling or losing interest, and quickly “react to the way a discussion is going, provide scaffolding as and when it is needed” (Paran, 2008, p. 70). The teacher can also ensure that learners remain engaged through the way tasks are initially engineered, and modified on the spot, to match learner interests and experiences, and thus to generate more involvement and elicit more responses. These general impressions of the participants seem to concur with Paran’s (2008, p. 43) assessment that “research indicates that learners who have been exposed to positive experiences with literature, and who are given the opportunity to read literature and respond to it, both benefit linguistically and enjoy the experience.”

## **Concluding Comments**

This paper has detailed one example of classroom innovation in ELT at the micro level of one Japanese university, and demonstrates how MEXT recommendations (MEXT, 2013; Gakugei, 2016) for developing communication abilities can be interpreted in practical terms.

Its wider relevance is that it also provides an illustration of what can be achieved in learner L2 output and motivation via a change in input and methodology. In the context described, extracts of literature written in English are the stimulus for collaborative analysis, discussion, and writing, yet these steps could equally be followed with texts from other genres and modes. Likewise, similar changes in teaching methodology could be employed at different stages of education, with the provision of appropriate scaffolding.

By using interesting and thought-provoking textual input, changes in goals result in learner engagement with the literary content, and substantial increases in the amount of classroom

discussion, creative thinking, and written output, thus maximising on opportunities for L2 practice. When compared with general English classes relying on typical ELT textbooks or everyday conversation topics, courses such as *English through Literature* can provide both scope for and evidence of greater L2 gains and participant satisfaction, as learners personalise issues raised in the literary texts and feel a real desire to exchange views, and to express themselves.

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