

## Conference Report

## The LiLT SIG Forum at JALT 2019: Using literature effectively for learner agency

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*Kwansei Gakuin University***Read, research, write:****Ethnographic poetry in the classroom**

In the Japanese university context, English courses often focus on improving not only language skills, but also on developing global perspectives and academic skills. In a content-based poetry course, world literature in English translation was used to meet both these broad aims and the course-specific learning objectives. These objectives were to study a topic in English, use the language skills learned in other courses, do research on an academic topic, and participate in small group discussions.

The second-year policy studies students enrolled in this particular course read and discussed excerpts from two poems *House to House* and *Barjeel* by Shamma Al Bastaki (2018). These poems are based on transcripts from ethnographic research and interviews she conducted with people living in local communities in the United Arab Emirates. They were chosen because the author and the students are in the same age range and have similar academic areas of study. She wrote the poems when she was a university student, and one of her majors was social research and public policy. Furthermore, Al Bastaki's poems include familiar topics: memories related to food and home.

Before class, students completed a homework assignment to read information about the author and her writing process, and to preview literary terms and vocabulary included in the poems. At the beginning of the class, this information was reviewed and an additional activity to practice enjambment, when a sentence continues from one line to the next without punctuation, was done (see Hillis, 2019). Following the lesson plan *Language in transit: Understanding ethnographic poetry* (Asymptote for Educators, 2018), students read excerpts from the poems together in class, and then answered questions which prompted them to examine how enjambment, format, and language were used in the poem. After reading and discussing these poems, students began to plan their own poetry projects

by choosing a topic and a person to interview. This project culminated with students writing a poem in the style of *House to House* and *Barjeel*. They presented their poems which were based on their own experiences or interviews with friends or family members.

As the original poems include the themes of food and housing, they were two of the student topic choices for the poetry project. In addition, students could choose another significant personal memory. The most popular topic was food, chosen by almost half the students. Most of the remaining students wrote about an important memory, such as an experience with club activities or study abroad. Only a few students chose to write about a memory related to their home or a special place in their house. Students brought their finished poems to class and read them aloud to a small group of classmates.

One point that could be improved upon for future lessons would be to spend more time in class to instruct students how to conduct an interview and to practice with classmates. This would give them the opportunity to have more experience and practice with the research skill of interviewing before starting their projects. Reading and writing ethnographic poems is one innovative way to encourage discussion, research, and creativity in the university language classroom.

**Author Biography**

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