

*Interview***An Interview with Iain Maloney, Author, Editor, Journalist, and Teacher,
on the State of Literature and Creative Writing in EFL**

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Assistant professor at Aichi University and LiLT SIG member Jared Michael Kubokawa sat down virtually with LiLT Journal Assistant Editor Iain Maloney for a wide-ranging conversation about LiLT SIG and perspectives on the roles of literature and creative writing (CW) in EFL.

Key words: creative writing, literature in language teaching

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

I'm originally from Aberdeen, Scotland, and now I live in Gifu Prefecture. I've been in Japan for about 15 years following the usual teaching career path. I have published a number of books and write regularly for outlets around the world, but most often for *The Japan Times*.

How did you begin using literature in your language classroom?

My undergraduate degree is in English Literature and my masters is in Creative Writing. My first teaching position was in the U.K. on a university access course helping prepare mature students for a return to higher education. For me, literary texts and education have always been intertwined. Working in language schools in Japan usually doesn't provide much scope to incorporate literature into a language classroom, but once I moved into the university system nothing was going to stop me.

In the *PanSIG Journal* (2019b), you discuss the approach of comparing texts in “divergent, contrastive ways” (p. 207). Could you tell me a bit more about how you choose the literature and your contrastive pedagogy?

Choosing literature for the classroom is an inexact science. Firstly, you can only really choose from the pool of literature you already know well. Secondly, every class has its own level, its own dynamics and personality, so texts that work well with one group may not be so

successful with another. For example, I've taught a poetry course over the last few years. One class was really interested in *haiku* written in English by non-Japanese writers while another class was less interested in those poems and much more fascinated by Japanese haiku that had been translated into English. There will always be a certain amount of trial and error.

As for the contrastive element, one of the biggest problems I found with teaching creative writing—to L1 or L2 speakers—is that many students assume there is a correct way of doing things, so consequently a number of incorrect ways. That's reinforced in academic writing classes where there are clearly defined rules regarding things like structure, referencing, and citations. Creative writing is different. The only rule is “does it work?” One method I've found successful is to show students how different writers approach the same task. In my travel writing class, for example, we look at up to six different opening paragraphs and examine how each one works within its own specific aims (Maloney, 2018).

How do you get students involved? How can language teachers invite students to make meaning and discuss texts?

The students need to generate the meaning and the discussion. If I lecture them on what I think a text means, all they learn is what I think about it. By getting students to work together, and by not overloading them—giving them time to really dig into a text at their own pace—they will unearth the things that interest them and

therefore have more ownership over the class. Sue Sullivan (2015) has done some great research on this. In a creative writing class, the literature is there to act as a catalyst, or an example, not as a recipe to be followed. So what a student finds useful and important in a text may be something I hadn't considered, and that's the joy of literature. As with anything in education, some students get into it quickly, others are resistant, some need coaxing while others need guiding. The most important thing is to understand that there can be multiple—even contradictory—readings of a text so encourage whatever avenue of thought the text leads them down.

What troubles and triumphs have you experienced while bringing literature into your language classes? How does it relate to EFL writing and composition pedagogy?

The most obvious success has been in getting students to enjoy L2 writing. Academic writing classes are rarely a student's favourite class and they are never shy in telling you this. Creative writing is supposed to be fun. It's freeing, it allows them to use all the language they've spent years accumulating in interesting and unusual ways and I've had many students tell me that they've never looked forward to a writing class before.

As for troubles, beyond the obvious things you get with every class—the student who would rather be somewhere else, the student who didn't do the homework and so isn't prepared for class, that kind of thing—the worst classes are when I've chosen a text that doesn't work. Sometimes I misjudge the level and the entire class is taken up with just trying to understand the text. Other times there can be culture-specific things that cause misunderstandings. If you have the wrong text then the class will just grind to a halt. But that's the process. Not every class will be a winner when you are developing a new course and trying out new materials.

On the topic of writing, you have published a number of works in prose and poetry. The latest being *The Only Gaijin in the Village* (Maloney, 2020), a memoir about life in Japan. Could you walk me through how you became an author?

Like all authors, I'm a failed rock star. I started writing songs when I was a teenager which developed into bad adolescent poetry and eventually bad adolescent short stories. I started getting published while I was an undergraduate and did my masters in Creative Writing. I graduated that course in 2004 but my first book wasn't

published until 2014. How did I become an author? By writing and writing and writing and writing and writing and eventually something I wrote was good enough to become a book. There's no great secret to it, unfortunately. No shortcuts.

In “The Only Gaijin in the Village” you share a thought-provoking philosophy about Japan: “The first rule of living in Japan is: show willingness” (Maloney, 2020, p. 11). Could you elaborate on this a bit more please?

I say it's the first rule of living in Japan but really it's the first rule of being a new person in any situation—don't come in with your mind made up, with fixed attitudes and behaviours. You have to be willing to try and to change. Many of the people I've seen struggle to live in Japan are people who have a set idea of how things should be based solely on their own experiences to date and are unwilling to question those assumptions. That's not to say that all hardships faced are the fault of the immigrant, of course not, but thinking “Japan should change to fit me” is just going to lead to stress and disappointment.

While teaching at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies you were able to create a curriculum for CW within their EAP program. How has your philosophy of showing willingness helped you in this endeavor?

The university was open to the idea of adding creative writing to the curriculum in theory, but they weren't convinced there would be much demand for it, or that they could justify adding it at the expense of something else, which is totally understandable. So for my first year there I ran an extracurricular class a couple of evenings a week. I had to give up my free time to do it, and it was entirely voluntary, but it was worth it. Even though the students weren't getting any credit for the course, around a dozen signed up for each class. The numbers plus the feedback from the students convinced the department that there was demand for the course (Maloney, 2019a).

I love your quote about writing and teaching CW: “Anyone who can learn to write, can learn to write creatively. Anyone who can teach writing, can teach creative writing. All that remains is the will to do so” (Maloney, 2019a, p. 19). What would you recommend to other EFL teachers who are

interested in bringing CW into their classes? Are there any potential pitfalls to look out for?

The biggest pitfall is, as I mentioned before, thinking that there's a correct way to write creatively. Anything goes, as long as it works, as long as it achieves the aims of that specific text. If it's horror, is it scary? If it's comedy, is it funny? Things like that. If you try to teach creative writing like academic writing then you'll kill all the creativity before you get going. In many ways teaching creative writing is much easier than teaching academic writing. You're not trying to corral a student's ideas into a specific structure, for example, and not worrying about thesis statements or topic sentences and certainly not thinking about APA or anything like that. That's why I said anyone who can teach writing, can teach creative writing. It's very freeing.

In the winter 2019 *LiLT Journal*, you discuss using literature examples by such authors as Iain Banks, Alex Garland, and Haruki Murakami to highlight specific writing techniques: "One aim of this lesson was to connect techniques in CW with techniques the students had already learned in their academic writing" (p. 7). Can you tell us a bit more about this technique, please?

Very few of the students I've taught have done any creative writing, even in L1, so they tend to be a little apprehensive at the start. One way to overcome that is to link something they don't know to something they do know. In the class on opening paragraphs, for example, once they've done their own digging and analysis, and we have a white board full of their ideas, I draw their attention to features that can be analogous to things I know they have learned in their academic writing classes. In *The Beach*, the opening sentence "The first I heard of the beach was in Bangkok, on the Khao San Road" can be thought of as being analogous to a thesis statement (Garland, 1997, p. 5). It's telling us this book is about a beach, a beach in Thailand, the beach is unusual, or special in some way, because the character only found out by word of mouth ("I heard about it") and, if you know the reputation of the Khao San Road, then you know just from this sentence that it's going to be a book about young backpackers. That process of breaking things down in that way and comparing them to ideas they are familiar with provides a bridge between the concrete and abstract. We remember great opening lines because they manage to introduce the text perfectly, the way a good thesis statement should.

At Aichi University, I have seen an increase in students' motivation after participating in CW workshops. How have your students responded? What outcomes have you witnessed so far?

Certainly, they look on L2 writing in a more positive light. I think it also has enormous benefits for their confidence. I'm working on a paper just now that looks at this. One of the great things about creative writing is that students can do it with any level of English (Maloney, 2019a). Obviously, a beginner isn't going to write a 900-page novel, but they could write a haiku or an acrostic [poem], for example. Creative writing doesn't require students to learn new vocabulary or structures, but it does allow them to explore what they have already learned and to use it in new and interesting ways. My hypothesis is that this process will give them greater confidence in their L2 ability overall. One thing students regularly tell me is that they struggle to share their opinions, to talk about their feelings. I find this in Japanese as well. Creative writing classes allow students the freedom and gives them the support to practice this. I've witnessed it anecdotally and now, hopefully, my data will support that conclusion.

That is great. I believe that language teachers can and should utilize CW more often in their classrooms. You have written that "CW may be the most under-used tool in the EFL box" (Maloney, 2019a, p. 18). Can you elaborate a bit more on this?

A year or so ago someone contacted me via email about a paper they were working on looking at how creative writing was taught in Japan. She asked me a few questions, then said "Can you put me in touch with other creative writing teachers?" and then listed a few people she had already contacted. That list comprised everyone I've ever heard of who teaches creative writing at university in Japan. It's still very niche. Many people seem to think it's a waste of time, or that it's very low on the list of priorities. Now I'm biased, but I'd say that creative writing has so many benefits for second language acquisition across the board that it is odd not to use it.

Hypothetically speaking, if a professor were to choose one of your novels as the topic for a university course, what novel would you choose and why?

For an EFL class, *The Waves Burn Bright* would probably make the most sense. *First Time Solo* contains a lot of

Scottish dialect that may be tricky for L2 readers, as well as a few scenes that are probably not safe for the classroom. *The Waves Burn Bright* deals with a number of issues that would make for interesting discussion classes, and a number of writing techniques that could be fun to explore in a CW class.

Thank you for your time and wisdom, Iain. I am sure that the readers have gained a number of important insights. Best of luck in your teaching and writing endeavors.

Author Biography

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