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Interview

**Notes on Literary Education:
Teaching Language through Fiction in a New Textbook from the Asahi Press**

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Published in January of this year, *Notes on Brotherhood: English Literature in the Classroom Vol. 1* immerses English language learners in engaging topics through original short fiction. The textbook's three chapters are based on three interlinked short stories, which tell a coming-of-age narrative about two brothers growing up in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States during the 1990s and early 2000s. These pieces were composed exclusively for this textbook by Michael Larson, an author based in Tokyo who teaches at Keio University.

Notes on Brotherhood was developed as a collaboration between the Asahi Press and the Kanto Branch of The English Literary Society of Japan (ELSJ) and was edited by Professors Soichiro Oku (Kanto Gakuin University), Kazuya Sato (Japan Women's University), Kyoko Kuze (Toyo University), Wataru Sasakawa (Aoyama Gakuin University), and Kohei Furuya (Aoyama Gakuin University).

The central story of each chapter is accompanied by an author's introduction and the annotated text provides context and brief cultural and linguistic explanations. The three chapters are subdivided into 12 units, which are short and digestible enough to be covered during a single class. The first story takes place when the two main characters are children, the second takes place while they are in high school, and the third takes place during their young adulthood. As the larger narrative advances, so do the complexity of the word choice, cultural references, and narrative structure of the individual stories, helping students to gradually grow their understanding of language and culture. In this way, *Notes on Brotherhood* is designed to help intermediate or advanced language learners push their abilities to new heights. Special attention is given to colloquial usages that appear throughout the text and which are typical of contemporary fiction and the way English is used by

native speakers; learning these types of expressions will be especially useful to students who plan to travel or study abroad. Toward this end, every unit comes with comprehension and usage questions as well as writing and discussion prompts. To make the textbook approachable, it also comes with a CD featuring readings of each story by the author himself, and the teacher's manual includes in-depth summaries of each story in Japanese.

What follows is a conversation between Michael Larson and Soichiro Oku about the development of this innovative, new textbook. Larson and Oku discuss the features and strengths of this approach to teaching English language and literature while also talking about the challenges this project presented.

ML: This is the first text published by the English Literature in the Classroom research group, which is part of the Kanto Branch of the ELSJ. Professor Oku, why did your research group want to publish a textbook?

SO: A few years ago, our research group put together a practical guidebook to show how professors in the Kanto Branch of the ELSJ teach literature in their own classes—like, “Hey this is what we're actually doing.” We hoped it would be a reference text and would show there are lots of approaches to English language education, including those utilizing fiction, poetry, and even films and online tools. But, when working with a particular literary text, I think an important aspect of any educator's methodology is just teaching it over and over. So, these approaches are very individualized.

For our next project, our research group decided to begin a series that anyone could use in the classroom. Board members Masahiko Abe (Tokyo University) and Noriyuki Harada (Keio University) came up with this

idea, and when I became president of the Kanto Branch of the ELSJ, we decided to continue this project.

Around that time, we heard that the Asahi Press was interested in making teaching materials using original literary works, and so we decided the executive council would act as editors and we'd put out the first textbook in a series called *English Literature in the Classroom*. It was perfect timing, and we were like, "Let's do it!"

Around that time, you gave a presentation at the ELSJ Kanto Branch's conference, and I heard about your background in creative writing from Professor Hiromi Ochi (Senshu University). This was why we reached out to you about the project, and then the Asahi Press officially asked you to write the text.

ML: What do you see as the difference between a theoretical approach and the approach in this textbook?

SO: Of course, with any text meant for use in a classroom, it's not always easy to distinguish theory and practice. Even very practical programs—like the British General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and the A-Levels—have a legacy of treating literary texts in a certain way and have a certain theoretical methodology behind them.

However, in Japan, when using literature in English education, the most important question is, "How are we using literary texts to teach language?" Our approach has to emphasize the practical aspects of language learning while also having a solid foundation in theory. You could say our approach is based on "theory plus practice."

ML: What do you think are the benefits of learning English through literature? Did you read a lot of English literature when you were learning English yourself? Do you have any favorite books?

SO: I'm a graduate of Keio University's English Literature Department, and actually, my main seminar focused on English linguistics. But all students in the department had to take classes in the history of English, ancient and medieval English, and phonetic linguistics. Even seminar students had to take medieval linguistics, and everyone had to read the original text of *Beowulf* and *The Canterbury Tales*. It was really an all-around education. So, even as a linguistics student, I had a background in literature. During my college days, it was beaten into me that there's no point in learning English if you can't read literary works.

After graduating, I worked as a high school teacher for 10 years. Still, reading literary works in English was very difficult for me, and, even more than just studying English, I thought of being able to read literature as the point I wanted to arrive at. It's regrettable that after 6 or more years studying English, many students still can't speak English or even read a single page of a Nobel Prize-winning text, like a book by Kazuo Ishiguro. There needs to be a balance in developing all those skills. In English education in Japan these days, listening and speaking are emphasized, while reading is somewhat neglected. But of course, by learning English through literature you also absorb the social context, so you learn about people's way of thinking and living. This is what makes reading such an essential skill—what distinguishes it from speaking or listening.

To balance things out, I recommend exposing students to a variety of genres in English, with literary works—which are often the most difficult—as the ultimate goal. Perhaps the toughest thing for students is when they read the first sentence and can't really grasp the background. I think literature makes for great teaching materials because it forces students to try to understand how the story will develop from a certain situation or setting. It makes them use their imagination, inspiring creativity. In the end, I think it's good to see reading and enjoying works of literature as a kind of ultimate goal.

In my own classes, I've used works by Kazuo Ishiguro and, recently, *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. These days, when I go overseas for research, I go to bookstores and pick a few titles from the piles of popular paperbacks, and I bring them back to Japan to give to my students to enjoy.

ML: Are there any parts of *Notes on Brotherhood* that you particularly enjoyed? Which part do you think will interest students the most?

SO: In the first story, I really enjoyed the sense of youth that emerges from the initial scene at the baseball game. Although then the problems within the family gradually become clear before the dramatic final scene at the military training ground. But by starting with the baseball scene, the narrative seems very bright and playful and gradually becomes more serious.

In the second piece, I thought the stage play and the preparations the characters are making for the drama were rendered very vividly, and I also thought the

slightly dark background of the teacher who is directing the play was very well captured.

By the third story, when the two main characters visit their stepbrother at his ship, we see how the parents have divorced and remarried, and new siblings have been added to the family. After being apart for several years, the two brothers have a kind of reunion, and we get the sense that while they've gone their separate ways and even though they get in something of a fight, in the end, they still share this relationship. In the final scene, you can see the complexity of their brotherhood. I guess I could say it really helped me visualize it. The scene of the docks near the ocean at night was very good.

ML: Is there a plan for the future of the "English Literature in the Classroom" series?

SO: Yes, this textbook is the first volume in the series, and I think the Asahi Press may be interested in making a second and even a third volume. This time, the executive council of the Kanto Branch of the ELSJ acted as editors. For future volumes, the makeup of the council will likely change, and we might aim for a schedule of something like one volume every two years, although that's not set in stone yet. In the future, it might be interesting to have works depicting various other cultures, such as Australia or England, although it's not necessarily easy to find works that are at the right level for Japanese students.

In fact, one thing I wanted to ask you was, what was the most difficult about writing these stories?

ML: I'm always writing, although usually the fictions I create come from my personal interests and motivations. When the Asahi Press approached me about this project, I wanted to write something that would live up to my standards, though it also needed to appeal to Japanese students who are in early adulthood. So, I was conscious of the need to write something that would land with a wide audience, while also being particular, grounded in detail, and based in a specific reality.

It took me a long time to decide exactly what to write. At one point, I was considering a more young-adult style and narrative mode. Although I have never written young adult fiction, and this was part of why I eventually turned away from that approach.

In the end, I decided to try a more personal story, which would allow me to craft the pieces without doing too much research—and that was important because of the time constraints we were operating under. Thus, I

wound up drawing on my experience growing up in the United States during the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, and I thought I could use that to reflect on American culture and society. At the same time, by this point, the 1990s and early 2000s are far enough in the past so as to feel a bit foreign or unknown, and therefore perhaps interesting to students. I thought this would be a way to show a little bit of what American society was like before the internet was everywhere and everyone had a smartphone, and I also wanted to depict what it was like in the aftermath of the Cold War and then later, during the Iraq War. This seemed like an appealing setting with which to depict the family saga and the coming-of-age story I was interested in telling.

SO: Yes, I was interested by the period setting and background. I haven't really read much about the interaction of average Americans with the military, and so that part seemed very fresh, kind of a new flavor. I also wasn't familiar with the region in Washington State you describe but looking at the photos you provided for the textbook I feel like I could easily imagine it. All the cultural and social background you managed to include was intriguing, and during the process of looking up those references and trying to explain them for Japanese students, I got interested myself. But I guess that was your intention, right?

ML: Well, I included those cultural and social details to make the stories feel real. But I also hope it has the effect of making the text appealing to teachers because it gives them plenty of avenues to pursue the things they're interested in talking about or discussing with their students.

In the text, there are a lot of references to works, such as the play in the second story and the films and novels that are mentioned. Also, this is a period that has been depicted in film and on the page. One example that comes to mind is the collection of short stories, *Redeployment* by Phil Klay, which has even been translated into Japanese. I'm hopeful that teachers who use this text will be inspired to use these other works as jumping-off points. A chance to show a film in class or look at the play or talk about some of the other authors that are mentioned, such as Zadie Smith or Denis Johnson, who wrote *Jesus' Son*.

SO: To me, the stories seemed very polished, like they could be translated and published as literature on their own. But, of course, you were writing with certain

restraints. Were there any other issues you had to work around when writing?

ML: As I said, I knew the stories needed to land with a wide audience. However, I had planned on basing these linked stories on my personal experience or growing up with a sibling. Specifically, I have a brother, so I knew it was going to be a story about two brothers. It would be very easy for a narrative like this to become very “boy-centric,” and I knew half the students who would potentially be assigned this textbook would be female. This is why, in the second story, the focal character becomes the teacher, who is a kind of mentor to the younger brother and has only recently moved to the area with her son.

Moreover, in the third story, which is set in Seattle, I think the reader has a chance to see some of the diversity of American society. We see people of different races, social classes, and professions. There are immigrants, tourists, and people from different parts of the country. Of course, ultimately the story is focused on the two brothers and the complexities of their relationship.

SO: The other editors and I are really pleased with how the project worked out, and I hope many teachers will find the textbook to be beneficial in their own classrooms.

Author Biographies

Michael Larson completed his MFA at the Ohio State University and earned a PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His stories and essays have appeared in journals including *Colorado Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Witness*, and in 2020 he published his first book, *When the Waves Came* (Chin Music Press), a nonfiction account of the Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami. <mwlarson@keio.jp>

Soichiro Oku completed his BA at Keio University and earned a PhD from the University of Tokyo. He specializes in corpus linguistics and stylistics, with a particular interest in English Education with ICT. His monograph, “A Stylistic Approach to Digital Texts: Teaching Literary Texts through New Media” appeared in *Literature and Language Learning in the EFL Classroom* (Palgrave, 2015) explored the power of literature to affect learners.

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