The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching

Introduction

Feature Article

Literature in Practice

Interviews

Review

Interview

Interview with Professor Paul Sevigny

Tara McIlroy

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University Center for Language Education

About Paul

I am interested in pedagogical and cultural stylistics, which employ stylistic analysis as a tool for understanding literature, culture, and learning language at the same time. I have been focused on designing literary discussion systems, training peer literacy leaders, and coaching creative writers, especially of language learner literature. More recently, I have been developing novel approaches to grading literature and have written my first graded reader.

Interview by Tara McIlroy

Paul and I met virtually when we were both PhD students at the University of Birmingham. Paul seems to be able to connect different strands of his areas of expertise through his interests in language learning, discussion circles, and narrative. Paul is passionate about exploring new approaches to sharing stories and assisting students, especially when it comes to working with stories in multiple languages. We have met again at JALT on multiple occasions since our first encounter, the most recent being in 2022 when Paul gave a presentation on bilingual short stories alongside a Japanese colleague. His current research project, a KAKEN research initiative entitled *Developing Bilingual Short Stories and Community Literacy Activists* looks at innovations in writing and working with multilingual short stories. We appreciate Paul agreeing to participate in an interview for the LiLT journal.

Tara McIlroy: First off, could you tell us a bit about your background in literature and language teaching?

Paul Sevigny: I came to Japan as an Assistant Language Teacher in 1989. While working as an ALT, I confirmed my interest in becoming a teacher, and entered the University of Hawai'i Second Language Studies MA program, where I worked with Mike Long (known for task-based language teaching) as my advisor. Deep

experiences in both art and science have been important in shaping my views toward language teaching and research.

I started teaching with literature as a teacher in an American high school. My role was to make a literature circle system called 'The Harkness Method' accessible to ESL students (Sevigny, 2012). These students, in their first year of high school, would have to talk about and write essays based on books such as *The House on Mango Street*, *The Kite Runner*, *The Odyssey*, and modern muckrakers like *Fast Food Nation*. I would sometimes put on a wig and impersonate the authors, so my students could interview 'the author' about what they were trying to get across in their books.

At that time, I also directed short-term programs and would write short stories for specific sets of visiting students and then have a high school student write the screenplay version. Thus, with aspiring American high school cinematographers supporting the show, the visiting language students would star as actors in their first English movie. My favorite was called 'The iDream Movie' (Sevigny & Yamamoto, 2006). I have enjoyed literary writing, drama, and the discussion of literature with L2 learners for many years now.

After that, I came back to Japan and worked to install an extensive reading (ER) program at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University and have supported ER ever since. I also have been interested in employing literary texts as a basis for discussion and completed a PhD in English Language and Literature (Sevigny, 2019) at the University of Birmingham, with Michael Toolan as my advisor. Specifically, I researched role-based literature circle discourse. During my dissertation studies, I also developed a course for teaching creative writing of short stories as a way for students to explore the stages of culture shock (Sevigny, 2017). My main interest has been researching how literature circles work and how to make the methodology more accessible to teachers and students around the world. Part of my research has been to investigate changes in self-efficacy for literary

discussion over the course of a semester, and I was glad to find large effect sizes for increases in self-efficacy for literary discussion as part of my dissertation research (Sevigny, 2022). Having an interdisciplinary mindset, I believe that when students and teachers put their all into engrossing processes such as discussion and art making, the learning can become indelible.

TM: Delving a bit deeper into research, please explain a bit more about your research interests and how they have developed to your current way of thinking.

PS: Like many applied linguists, I started into the language teaching field being deeply impressed by Krashen's input hypothesis, Long's interaction hypothesis, and Swain's output hypothesis. My early training in the task-based approach has been complemented with text-based and skill-based approaches to organizing curricula over the years, as there are times when each of these three approaches are more useful than the others. I tend to focus on building linguistic and cultural awareness through comprehensible, literary and informational texts, in student-centered settings where students co-construct meaning. Central to my approach are Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and Pedagogical and Cultural Stylistics (Carter, 2010; Zyngier, 2001; Zyngier & Watson, 2022).

As for literature circles, I was hopeful I could create a simple, non-role-based alternative to Daniels (2002) and Furr's (2004) systems, following the trend in L1 settings where role-based systems have been let go. I was surprised to find there are almost no data-driven studies of L2 literature circles in EFL or ESL contexts that definitively show the way for language teachers in this area, so I settled on studying the discourse of role-based literature circles for my dissertation work. Role-based literature circles provide several affordances for research as the various roles (Discussion Leader, Summarizer, Word Master, Connector, Passage Person, etc.) differentiate responsibilities and allow for studying the connections between talk about texts and various levels of interpretation (Sevigny, 2022). My research definitely confirmed the value of these role-based literature circles especially for CEFR B1 students. Currently, I have been developing a stake-holder approach to role-based literature circles, which will offer an important alternative for CEFR B1+ to CEFR B2 students especially.

TM: What (or who) are your influences?

PS: As a language teacher, I worked with Mike Long, Richard Day, Dick Schmidt, and JD Brown, mainly at the University of Hawai'i in the 1990s. UH was definitely at the forefront of the language teaching field at that time. My first research was on sources and methods in second language needs analysis with Mike Long. Richard Day's work with Extensive Reading has had an equally strong impact on my approach to teaching. Related to ER, I embrace Widdowson's (1998) approach to authenticity, that is, a text must be appropriate for the learners who are reading it, and thus the teacher's job is to grade language to create an effective learning context and experience for L2 students.

As an example, let's take Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" (1927). Anyone who has read this story with language students knows the lexis is not especially difficult, yet interpreting the story requires layers of external textual referencing – to the history of Spain, abortion, the term 'white elephant' and so on. While completing my PhD at the University of Birmingham, Michael Toolan, my advisor, challenged me to write a graded reader version of this story. This exercise turned into my first graded reader, *Kittens Like Steam Clouds* (Inkblots, 2023). By creating a parody of the story, contextualized to Japan and set in a specific site in Beppu, Oita, I needed to research a number of works by Hemingway and other authors like Soseki, and even some obscure ones like Brother Jo who wrote poetry in Hawaiian Creole English. The interesting part to me is that adding context meant elaboration, not condensing or redacting, and it also meant exploring responses to literature like parody, satire, and appropriation, rather than purely retelling in a summarized form.

TM: Particular to reading, what is your current project and how are you conducting the research?

PS: Over the past few years, I have been working on a Grant-in-Aid project called 'Developing bilingual short stories and Community Literacy Activists'. I hired multilingual undergraduate students to rewrite and translate stories that started as university stage plays that featured the dances, culture, martial arts, and fashions from the countries represented at our school. After I started the project, however, the pandemic hit, these performances were canceled for two years. So, after securing our first three stories, we had to reverse the process for the last three stories. That is, we had student

authors who were familiar with the cultural stage plays write original short stories that could someday be appropriated into new stage play scripts – in the reverse process. This became sort of a happy accident, because while not the intended process, it empowered students from countries less well represented on our campus to contribute to the anthology, including students from Japan.

So, we now have six stories on our website (StudioCLA.org), each available in multiple stages (levels). The research has been aimed toward developing a community of practice around bilingual literacy for students at our dual language university. One of the main problems in this area is the dearth of materials available for researching bilingual literary discussion, so our website is a resource for those developing and/or researching second language literature circles in English or Japanese. In this regard, we are really just getting started.

TM: Now to the most creative part of your work recently, writing. Tell us how your current project brings together all the threads of language learning, literature, and creative work.

PS: Okay, on a larger scale, I have adapted the concept of Citizen Science (Gura, 2013) from hard sciences to the concept of Community Literacy Activism (Sevigny, Manabe, H. Shankar, & Lim, 2021) – to validate both research and development in the area of (multilingual) literacy development. While Community Literacy Activism is a theory, the first application of the theory has been to develop a process for students to author graded readers that celebrate the many cultures present on our campus. Additionally, as student authors represent their own cultures, they also tend to weave into their stories the suffering of their main characters, usually due to maladies unique to each of these cultures. I find there is an authenticity that comes from these students in their hope for the future of their countries in spite of these challenges.

The first six of these stories are part of an anthology called *YAMS – Young Adult Multicultural Stories* (Sevigny & Manabe, 2023). The stories have been produced in both English and Japanese. Most of the original drafts of the stories were 9,000 words. Then I asked the authors to rewrite the story to 4,000 words. The creative work here can best be described as creative destruction. The authors feel that I am asking them to destroy their own work, but that is the first lesson of

human creativity. Creating something new means letting go of the old. At this point, I train the students to use tools to consider the frequency of words and phrases in English to write the new version for an intermediate level audience. The tools for doing this in English are ER Central's Online Grade Text Editor, and Lextutor, mainly. At the same time, my collaborating researcher, Shoichi Manabe, worked to master similar tools for the Japanese language – like Jreadability, for example. We also consulted with Japanese language teachers to analyze Japanese language textbooks to create specifications that would work for students in our Japanese language program.

English is privileged to have many tools available for supporting language analysis that are not developed to the same level in some other languages. Community Literacy Activism can support the diffusion of such development across languages. Currently, we are starting to work with literature teachers in other countries whose students are developing new stories that represent their countries. I am inviting these teachers to create mirror sites for our stories where they can create translated versions to support multilingual literary discussion and development in their countries.

TM: The short story project looks quite unique in Japan. What do you think makes it different?

PS: One important distinguishing feature of this program is the emphasis on human creativity. The first six stories and translations of the *YAMS* series are human made, as it should be for language learning. For my students to write, translate, simplify, and illustrate works by hand was a deep, meaningful, and time-consuming undertaking. Since the narratives fit into an existing multicultural event program on campus, the stories have an organic authenticity and can work to cross-pollinate within that ecosystem. For example, this year, the India Week Grand Show was penned by a research assistant who has been working for the last two years as a Community Literacy Activist, so she was well aware of many issues regarding the community development of such shows. Plus, the community of students from India is rather small on our campus, so we are thrilled to know her story will be a future addition to the anthology. The students involved regarded their work as one of the most deeply meaningful of their university life.

A second feature is our provision of the same story in three levels, and in both English and Japanese

languages. This feature allows for various uses. Readers can move vertically within one language, or horizontally, taking a bilingual approach, reading one stage in both English and Japanese. Another unique feature of our dual language university is an exchange class program in which students studying in English and Japanese classes come together for bilingual class time. Providing multiple levels in two languages allows for multilingual/multilevel literary exchange discussions of culture-based texts.

TM: I attended your talk last year at JALT (2022) which featured multi-level stories in Japanese. What is your advice about working across languages?

PS: The *YAMS* story project is one that would provide Anglo teachers an opportunity for genuine exchange with their students. A few years back, Richard Day reminded us of his and Bamford's (2002) tenth principal of ER: *The teacher is a role model of a reader*. He pointed out that in L2 classrooms, this means that *the teacher is reading in their second language as well*. Crucially, the *YAMS* anthology gives English language teachers in Japan the opportunity to become a role model of an L2 reading teacher, and to authentically experience second language reading of literature as a learner. Reading the abridged stages of the Japanese stories may be a good place to start, if (like me) you struggle with reading *kanji*. It was very important for me to bring on Shoichi Manabe as a co-collaborator, who could mentor me on the Japanese aspects of our project.

For teachers who are already biliterate in English and Japanese, the *YAMS* series supports teachers and students practicing translanguaging, so I hope that some of our most bilingual English-Japanese teachers will try experimenting with the stories on our site to research bilingual literature circle practices. Additionally, some faculty members may wish to challenge their students to write stories in English or Japanese that represent their culture, so our website can provide models for products created in a bilingual format or perhaps might provide inspiration for something new or better.

For those who are mentoring student authors and translators, I would recommend developing a system of paired bilingual workers and have them read stories aloud to each other while trying to translate or paraphrase. We actually interviewed students in pairs to determine if they could create a productive writing and translating atmosphere between them. By ensuring that there was a collaborative, verbal and flexible linguistic atmosphere among the translators and editors, we were able to create a strong multicultural, collaborative team.

TM: How do your students respond to the work?

PS: On the level of story creation, the students report great joy in learning to work creatively with their second (or third) language. When teaching creative writing in a classroom environment, students often encountered difficulties in writing dialogue and choosing narrative point of view, for example. But when students are engaged first in a stage play as an author, they work with student actors who often improvise dialogue for scenes. In this way, the student authors and editors develop a deep connection to other community members on campus, some of whom have supported multiple productions for other countries as well. This deep connectedness among students and the shared experience in putting together these large cultural celebrations is extremely life-giving. This is successful in part because the program is not classroom based.

With regard to students who are reading the stories on the StudioCLA website, we are still in a learning stage. Teachers and students have expressed a desire for pdf versions of all the versions of the stories, with ruby furigana for the Japanese stories. Others have expressed interest in audiobook versions. Additionally, the lowest-level versions have had some mixed reviews, due to the strict teacher-led requirements for very short word limits (Stage one limit is 400 words in English or 800 characters in Japanese). Student editors have tried removing scenes, characters, and other details, which according to our focus group audiences, took away so much context that it actually made these versions harder to comprehend. For this reason, it is likely that the elementary versions will see some sort of radical change in approach in the future. At this point, readers seem very happy with the Stage 2 and Stage 3 versions in both languages, and after working to ensure continuity both vertically and horizontally for each story set, I believe we are ready to share them on other platforms like NPO Tadoku or Xreading.

TM: What are some next stages of the project?

PS: Currently, I am starting to meet and work with faculty members at other universities around the world who take a literary approach to teaching language. For example, one professor in Turkey is now running a competition for her students to contribute a story about

life in Turkey for the *YAMS* anthology. Thus, we are working with international collaborators to develop new stories.

Additionally, the research team is now working to reckon with the advent of tools like ChatGPT to better understand when these tools can add value to the process, and when they are short-circuiting, slightly dehumanizing, or literally robbing us of creative opportunity. At the same time, there may be some ways that generative AI like ChatGPT can help L2 learners to develop language and stylistic awareness. We are now dealing with a new subject for stylistic analysis: Machine-Generated Literature (MGL). The Community Literacy Activists in my program have been using ChatGPT to generate stories similar to those on our website and are studying the perceptions of EFL students regarding said output. At the same time, we are tracking the time it takes to create these stories in comparison to the prior YAMS anthology stories, which were 100% human made.

TM: What advice for other teachers and researchers do you have?

PS: In my opinion, we need teacher-researchers who can substantiate gains in proficiency, along with gains in empathy, cultural competence, and autonomy, in environments where literature is employed as the basis of the approach. New technology can help with this, but we need to find ways to manage it, while helping our students experience higher levels of creativity and self-efficacy in their language learning. AI was supposed to do the tedious parts, not take over the creative parts. It will take some concerted literacy activism on our part to ensure that human creativity and expression retain their vitality in our language programs. Lifting up our students' voices and creative works will help keep us on the path.

Author Biography

Tara McIlroy is Associate Professor at the Center for Foreign Language Education and Research, Rikkyo University, in Tokyo. She is an active practitioner and has taught literature and language at the secondary and tertiary level. Her current research interests include psychology in fiction, digital literature, and the integration of content and language in the classroom. <mcilroy@rikkyo.ac.jp>

References

Carter, R. (2010). Issues in pedagogical stylistics: A coda. *Language and Literature 19*(1), 115-122. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947009356715

Daniels, H. (2002). Literature Circles: Voice and Choice in Book Clubs and Reading Groups, Pembroke Publisher.

Day, R., & Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 14*(2). https://www2.hawaii.edu/~readfl/rfl/October2002/day/day.html

Furr, M. (2004). Literature circles for the EFL classroom. *Proceedings of the 2003 TESOL Arabia Conference. TESOL Arabia*: Dubai, UAE, 2004.

Gura, T. (2013). Citizen Science: Amateur experts. *Nature, 496*, 259-261. https://doi.org/10.1038/nj7444-259a

Hemingway, Ernest (1927). "Hills Like White Elephants." *Men without Women.* Charles Scribner's Sons.

Inkblots, P. (2023). Kittens like steam clouds. *VivaBeppu.* https://vivabeppu.wixsite.com/vivabeppu/post/kittens-like-steam-clouds

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Cambridge University Press.

Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University Website, (2023). 2030 Vision Statement. https://en.apu.ac.jp/home/about/content7/?&version=English

Sevigny, P., & Yamamoto, A. (2006). 'The iDream Movie' Unpublished movie script.

Sevigny, P. (2012). Extreme discussion circles: Preparing ESL students for 'The Harkness Method'. Polyglossia, *23*, 181-191. https://tinyurl.com/3mmth8fu

Sevigny, P. (2017). A cultural-stylistic approach to L2 short story writing: A teaching report. *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching, 6*(2), 67-71. https://tinyurl.com/53enm6mt

Sevigny, P. (2019, July). *Designing L2 Literature Circle discussion: Tools for teachers and researchers.* Third Module of doctoral dissertation. University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK. https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/9345/【Doctor Thesis】

Sevigny, P., Manabe, S., S. Shankar, C. H., & Lim, J. (2021). Community Literacy Activism: Amateur authors writing multilingual graded readers.

Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics 9(2), 12-22. https://tinyurl.com/yc3w8fke

Sevigny, P. (2022). Revising Role-Based Literature Circles for EFL Classrooms. In: Zyngier, S.,

Watson, G. (eds) Pedagogical Stylistics in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83609-2_13

Sevigny, P., & Manabe, S., (Eds.) (2023). *Young Adult Multicultural Stories*. StudioCLA. www.studiocla.org

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. M. Colle, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner and E. Souberman. Harvard University Press.

Widdowson, H. (1998). Context, community, and authentic language. *TESOL Quarterly, 32*(4), 705-716. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3588001

Zyngier, S. (2001). Towards a cultural approach to stylistics. *CAUCE Revista de Filologia y su Didactica, No. 24*, 365-380.

Zyngier, S., & Watson, G. (Eds*),* (2022). *Pedagogical Stylistics in the 21st Century*. Palgrave Macmillan.