

## Method in the Madness: Teaching of English Literature in Japanese Universities

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the problematics of teaching English Literature in an EFL context. The analysis is based on class-observations and interviews with students and teachers in six Japanese universities over a period of nine months. The focus is on issues of English proficiency and literary competence, on choices made for medium, material and method, and on problem-solving measures taken to reduce the 'foreignness' of English literary texts. Among the measures looked at are the current use of the grammar-translation method and the inclusion of various support/introductory/survey courses built into the English Studies programme as an attempt to close the students' proficiency-comprehension-knowledge gaps. Among the more contentious issues discussed are related to the wisdom of transplanting the canon of Western universities into non-English-speaking institutions, the appropriateness of imported teaching methodologies and the absence of local perspective input.*

*Keywords: English Literature in EFL; English Studies in Japan, teaching methodology; literary competence; Grammar Translation method, New Criticism*

### ENGLISH STUDIES IN JAPAN

Any discussion on the teaching of English Literature in Japan will have to be done in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) and English as a foreign language (EFL) for two reasons. Firstly, it is in the 12-year national school system that a literature major student begins the long journey of English language acquisition before arriving at the doorstep of a university. Secondly, English/American Literature is taught to students who have had two years of English proficiency courses at the university level and who then feel proficient enough to major in it. Language proficiency is fundamental to literary studies and the level of student proficiency provides the basis of methodology choice for the teacher. Hence a look at the ELT context will clarify some basic issues surrounding the teaching of English literature in Japan.

The ESL context is one where learners, whose mother tongue is not English, learn the English language from a young age through the nation's system of education, speak it fairly fluently, use it regularly in a generally English-speaking environment, and have wide exposure to it in the written and electronic media. In most cases, the language had been the official language of courts, government and business of the British colonial administration of the past and, in other cases, may still enjoy the same status after independence as in India and Singapore (Bell 2011).

On the other hand, in the EFL context, English is not the means of communication for the majority of its population and enjoys no special status as the official language for courts, administration or business (Bell 2011). In this non-English-speaking environment where the ELT tradition is not well established, the acquisition of the language may only be a necessary part of the educational system designed primarily to equip students for possible careers in organisations with international links. While there is a growing post-Independence bilingualism (English and indigenous language) in former British colonies, Japan as an example of the EFL context, remains mostly monolingual, although its language policies and

implementations may reflect its acknowledgement of the current usefulness of English for international communication and economic wealth.

English language is taught as a foreign language in Japan, is a required subject in almost all institutions of higher learning and the most studied of all foreign languages offered in any given university. Although it is not a state-required subject in the school system, the fact that it is a compulsory sub-test of university entrance examinations as well as a required subject at university level has forced over ten million twelve to eighteen year-olds, and another million or so university students to study English whether they like it or not (Eades, Goodman and Hada 2005).

According to the book *The 'Big Bang' in Japanese higher education* by Eades et al (2005), there seems to be a national obsession with English proficiency and its linkages to better employment and internationalism. State preoccupation with it is reflected in projects institutionalised by the Ministries of Education, Home Affairs, and Foreign Affairs. For example, there is the JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching) program which handles the annual invitation to Japan of over 4,500 non-Japanese assistant English teachers (AETs) and coordinators of international relations (CIRs) comprising mostly native English speakers. By 2009, though, the JET figures came down from a high of over 6000 of the early years of the decade to just over 4,000 (Hagerman 2009). There have also been attempts at reforming ELT over the past fifty years though “admittedly inadequate in scope and only effecting incremental change” (Eades et al 2005, p. 246) and “pursued for national economic goals rather than any individual linguistic needs” (Hagerman 2009, p. 47)

Yet, despite all the perceived need for English, Japanese students seem to have great difficulty in mastering the language. McVeigh (2002) reported a decline in their achievement over the years. According to the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) 1993 statistics, Japanese candidates achieved lower scores than China's 531, South Korea's 504, Taiwan's 503 and Vietnam's 511, ranking 149<sup>th</sup> in scores. In fact, McVeigh went on to elaborate, a subsequent report published four years later showed scores of Japanese students on the same test had not improved over three decades “while students in much of the rest of Asia have shown marked improvement” (2002, p.151). Worse, it is predicted that the ranking will drop further once a new composition section is added to the test (Yoshida 1997) which has always been based, in the past, on the multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank format. Test and Score Data summary for TOEFL iBT Tests January-December 2014 on a range of 0-120 show Japan (70) lagging behind China (77), South Korea (84) and Vietnam (79) ([www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227\\_un/web.pdf](http://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227_un/web.pdf)). Indeed, *The Asahi Shimbun* reported on September 10, 2014 that Japan was 40<sup>th</sup> out of 48<sup>th</sup> in the average TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores for 2013.

All in all, the predominant view is that there is a general failure of ELT in Japan, though different schools of thought attribute different reasons for it. The historical revisionist view puts it down to the insular, ‘island nation’ (*tan-itsu minzoku*), sufficient-unto-itself, syndrome. The culturalist argument is that the self-perceived uniqueness of the Japanese way of doing things is a stumbling block to accepting ELT reforms. The sociologist view blames it on state machinery, economic interests and the resulting politico-economically managed education system for an elaborate testing mechanism to evaluate and place individuals at appropriate levels in the workplace (McVeigh 2002). Linguists, too, have their own theories. Both Loveday (1996) and Aspinall (2003) share the view that the sociolinguistic environment in Japan does little to encourage effective communicative skills in the English language. According to them, this is due to many factors: the linguistic dissimilarity between English and Japanese, the linguistic disparity between the freedom of expression in English and the disciplined style of Japanese, the lack of a real need for communication in English in a monolingual society, a non-English support system that confines language practice only to

the classroom, and a misconception of English as life's fashionable accessory associated with fun and entertainment (hence, McVeigh's term 'fantasy English') rather than a language to be systematically learned through hard work.

The socio-linguist Loveday and many others also ascribe the failure to the system of education for using the outdated grammar-translation method and for the rote-learning demands of entrance examinations; on the teachers for their limited proficiency and dull textbooks; and the institutions for their conservative culture of teacher-centred instructions as well as their obsession with perfection and absolute correctness (Loveday 1996, pp. 95-99).

Of special interest to the present article is the issue of teaching methodology because of the probability that the problems related to the teaching of English Literature at the university may have its roots in the methodology adopted in the school system which, incidentally, continues to be used in the university. It thus becomes necessary to explore the major trends in ELT in the pre-university foundational phase in order to understand where the methodology is coming from in a literature seminar room later.

In the school system, the preferred methodology is the Grammar-Translation method (*yakudoku*). Basically, it operates in three stages: first, a sentence or text in English is translated word for word into Japanese; then the translated words will be re-ordered and re-coded according to the Japanese syntax. The teacher's job is to make sure the student's translation is accurate and to clarify certain points of grammar involved. Indeed the entire class activity may consist of this process repeated many times over as students present their translated version in class. This method requires the students to learn about English in Japanese. English taught this way loses its communicative purpose because it does not represent English as it is spoken and understood by English speakers. Furthermore, the medium of instruction is not English but Japanese. Despite the downside of the method, it is deemed by practicing Japanese teachers to be the most appropriate way of dealing with learners of very limited proficiency in English. Such perceptions are also shared by most of the lecturers interviewed in this study.

However, growing concern for such lack in communicative skills did prompt some attempts to bring about reforms in ELT at the tertiary level. The result is the oral approach to teaching which began with what was called the 'Palmer Oral English' approach in the pre-war period, followed by the post-war Fries Oral Approach to language learning called the 'Michigan Method'. Although this lasted for twelve years from 1956 to 1968, the oral input in ELT is still reflected in the oral and public speaking courses in the basic university proficiency programs, while the tradition of *yakudoku* survives in the reading and writing courses.

Today, Japanese ELT experts are divided in their support between the traditional *yakudoku* approach and the new 'communicative approach' that arrived from the West in the 1970s which proponents of the 'Michigan Method' see as 'the next step' to a more effective oral approach. The communicative approach to language teaching that reigned in the 70s offered a short-cut to a more utilitarian, more functional use of English needed in the EFL situation. The communicative approach takes care of the need to communicate in everyday situations of answering calls, greeting friends, asking for directions and sundry other mundane activities associated with the business of contemporary living. Ordinary, everyday reading materials from newspapers, restaurant menus, instruction manuals, travel brochures and such like are considered good triggers for learner engagement with the target language. This was supposed to be more manageable for the EFL stakeholders. But that brought with it a sense of sterility into language learning because the simulated dialogues supposed to happen in everyday life became contrived and stagey.

The pro-*yakudoku* supporters say that cultural enrichment through reading is important; the pro-communicative converts say English is needed for international

communication. But as with all imported teaching methodology that fails to contextualise method with local learning environment, the new communicative method too suffers a gap between theory and practice not only in Japan but throughout the ELT world in general. Though initially welcomed, the approach has encountered a passive but enormous resistance from the majority of the EFL teachers and students. (Eades et al.2005, p.252).

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research was to identify, describe and analyse reading approaches to literary texts that were adopted for English Studies in Japan. More specifically, the research aimed to explore how British/American Literature (henceforth, and collectively grouped under, English Literature) was taught in selected universities in Tokyo, Japan. The choice of Japan as a non-colonised, non-English-speaking country was intended to highlight how such countries dealt with English literary texts as a form of cultural import, in their institutions of learning. It was also intended to highlight how such institutions in a non-English-speaking environment were dealing with the ‘foreignness’ of the texts.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Are there problems of English proficiency among students studying English literature in a non-English-speaking environment?
- What are the teaching approaches used for the reading and analysis of the literary texts chosen and to what extent have western critical theories informed teaching methodology?
- What are the steps taken to manage problems of teaching methods and foreign texts?

## RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design of choice was the qualitative approach. This research is unapologetically subjectivist, based on the view that any interpretative truth/knowledge claim is always probabilistic and contestable, and that the human investigator could only produce a working hypothesis or a contextualised temporary knowledge or a provisional truth. This research also chose the route of case studies which explored a phenomenon (in this case, literature teaching) within temporal, social and physical boundaries (in this case, English Studies of selected universities in Tokyo). Explorations were empirical, observational, reflective and interpretative in nature. Because they were context-based, these case studies were concerned with local meanings, not abstract, unequivocal universal truths and required the researcher to spend substantial time on site, to be personally engaged with activities and operations, as well as to reflect on and constantly revise meanings of the unfolding phenomenon.

## SAMPLING

Determining sampling required the setting up of a typology of university type (national or private), university location (urban or rural, city or country), programme type (ELT or literature), staff type (male or female, native or expatriate) and medium of instruction (first, second or foreign language). The following typology was identified for the study.

- Type: both national/state & private
- Location: capital cities
- Programme: ELT and literature
- Staff: native & expatriate
- Medium of instruction: both mother tongue & English.

The typology provided balance and variables to the study as a whole, except in the case of location. The Tokyo universities were specifically chosen because they are cosmopolitan and international centres with relatively well established departments of English Studies. The other variable not considered was the gender of either staff or students mainly because the researcher had to accept whoever was made available.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in three stages: information-gathering; interpretation and triangulation; and final analysis and presentation over a period of 9 months in 6 Tokyo universities. Findings from such sources as documents, interviews and observations were corroborated to form an adequate ground for a compelling interpretation.

Information-gathering involved 3 methods of data collection. First necessary documents like books, journals, textbooks, course descriptions, teaching materials, student assignments, test papers and answer scripts were collected to yield a preliminary profile of critical/literary practice in the local literature-teaching fraternity and a survey of various perspectives on method and theory by both local and international scholars. These texts were read with the understanding that they were produced under certain material conditions within certain social and ideological systems. For example, expatriate and native writers might have different perspectives on the same issue because they come from different cultural backgrounds.

Secondly, interviews were conducted with 12 lecturers and 23 students. These mostly took the form of face-to-face verbal exchange although face-to-face group interviews with students had to be conducted when time was limited. There were also online interviews for teachers who could not get out of busy work schedules. All interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed and summarised. Altogether, five different sets of interview questions were prepared to be used for language teachers, literature teachers, students of language, students of literature and online respondents. The interview was designed to understand individual and group perspectives on teaching/learning-related matters, to be used ultimately for triangulation purposes in conjunction with other data gathering techniques.

Lastly, a total of 17 class observations were also carried out using a prepared class observation sheet. Details of teaching method, teaching aids, reading material, class activities and student response as well as teacher-student rapport were recorded for each 90-minute seminar session or 60-minute lecture session. In these sessions, the researcher played the role of a complete observer without interacting with the research subjects until the sessions were over, to avoid the struggle of keeping a balance between involvement and detachment or closeness and distance. The number of class observations was more than adequate to elicit generic features that consistently replicate patterns for analysis and interpretation. Observations conducted systematically and repeatedly over varying classroom situations on a sufficient number of sites yielded some kind of observational consistency.

The process of information gathering was then followed by a process of data-organising and data-interpretation through a procedure called 'triangulation' to identify broad trends in literature teaching/critical practice in each case study and across studies in each

country. The use of multiple methods of data-collection and multiple perspectives on a single phenomenon was to provide a more holistic view of the object of study than would otherwise be possible in a single-method, single-case study. Triangulating key bases for interpretation and deciding on key patterns to pursue were necessary to create a comfortable space to then make generalisations about the cases, with some measure of credibility. Generalisations made with predictable confidence such as these could serve as a kind of building blocks that would add to the growing edifice of knowledge.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the problematics of teaching English literary texts in Japanese universities based on triangulation of data from teacher-interviews, student-interviews and class-observations. They are organised here around important issues represented by the three research questions mentioned earlier - problems of English proficiency, teaching approaches and problems of methodology and texts

### PROBLEM OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

There is a general consensus in Japanese academia that the level of English proficiency of Japanese university students is inadequate to cope with the linguistic and literary demands of English (read British/American) literature. This lack of linguistic and literary competence, attributed to systemic and cultural factors already mentioned, is the reason given by some Japanese lecturers for their choice of Japanese as a medium of instruction for teaching English literature and for their choice of the grammar-translation approach (*yakudoku*) as a preferred teaching methodology. They say the lack of English proficiency is a stumbling block to adopting a more interactive or student-centered way of teaching, especially if it is done in English. In fact, it could even be an unfair practice because, according to one lecturer, 'students should not be put at a disadvantage by being unable to express opinions in English, especially in literature classes'. It is a concern shared by many, as reflected by what another literature lecturer from another university said, 'Students' English competence varies, and I don't want to judge their ability of interpretation based on that'.

Most Japanese lecturers interviewed acknowledged that in an ideal situation English should be the medium for teaching British/American literature, but as one lecturer observed, 'realities on the ground make it necessary to use Japanese instead, unless exposure is done earlier in school. This does not happen in the Japanese system'. He was, of course, referring to the way English language is taught in the national education system from elementary to high school where Japanese is the medium of instruction and the focus on grammar leaves little room for students to practice their oral skill, let alone speak up in an open and free class discussion.

Students, while moaning about their lack of proficiency, confirmed that this was indeed what happened in their past experience in school. According to one straight As fourth year English major student, 'learning English through grammar in junior and high school was difficult, stressful and not-fun'. Some students who could afford the fees would enroll at privately run 'cram schools' (*juku*) where English is taught in English. Another fourth year English major from another university commented that even after four years at university, 'it feels like being back to starting line...not enough English is learnt in spite of years in school learning it'. She put the blame squarely on a system that 'thinks studying English by memorizing it is better'.

However, there are many defenders of this school system among the university staff. A literature lecturer claimed that ‘the focus on grammar is the right approach. The communicational approach only works if it takes place in an English-speaking environment’, the hard reality being a monolingual Japan where English does not figure largely in the daily life of its citizens. A language lecturer offered another explanation: ‘Language teachers have to use Japanese to explain English grammar. Otherwise it will be difficult for Japanese students, who are not adequately proficient in English, to grasp the concepts. But the end result is proficiency in English, not Japanese’.

There appears to be a big gap between the English proficiency levels in school and in the university. The university program is supposed to develop communicative skills that students can successfully carry with them into the job market and work place. It usually covers all the skills of reading, writing and speaking (including debating and public speaking) that require more than rote-learning. Often, students who have studied English grammar in school to prepare for the multiple-choice questions and filling-in-the-blank statements of the entrance examinations are caught by surprise by the new demands and find themselves struggling in their first year at university. Some of these students proceed to become English majors in the third and fourth years.

Interestingly, university students interviewed had varied responses to their university English learning experiences, ranging from better to more of the same. Most students would say they learned a great deal in the first two years. Some said that ‘reading and other class activities were enjoyable and the lecturers were more nurturing’. As for the oral and public speaking sessions involving speech-writing and oral presentation in English, usually handled by native speakers of English, students said these gave them a chance to express their opinions even as they feared making mistakes and even as they had difficulties understanding their teachers’ explanations because ‘they talk too fast’.

Other students, though, have had a different experience. One third year student felt that the oral and public speaking class did not serve its purpose because only the teacher would be speaking English while students would be speaking Japanese. Students explained that it was not for want of trying on their part but after many unsuccessful attempts, they ‘give up and lapse into Japanese’. According to them, in oral classes conducted by Japanese teachers, both students and teachers would be speaking in Japanese instead of English and so there was very little learning in English taking place. To complicate the issue further, there were students of English literature who were, in fact, taught in English but who nevertheless still felt that expressing ideas in Japanese was better because there was less risk of them being misunderstood, and that to do it in Japanese sounded more academic and could be done ‘with passion’. For them, writing in English might produce something that would sound ‘unsophisticated’ in comparison, a point dismissed by a foreign native speaker lecturer as ‘preconceptions’ and ‘a Japanese ideology inscribed in the culture’, by which he meant ‘the *humility* (I am not worthy. My English is so *poor!*) plus the fecund ‘wise’ teacher spoon-feeding ‘answers’ to the empty ‘ignorant’ student blueprint’. Another native speaker lecturer was equally dismissive and offered this observation borne out of 17 years of teaching in Japan: ‘It’s not like they write a brilliant paper in Japanese, then write a dumbed-down one in English...Students need to be taught enough English to get up to that [sophisticated] level, but the way of teaching English is always too low for students’ level of maturity. So, they get trapped into immaturity and low language levels. It’s a bad cycle’.

‘Enough English’ in expatriate teachers’ vocabulary is precisely ‘teaching English in English’, obviously based on a pedagogical maxim that links language acquisition to language use. To them, any other way would be an incredulous idea, as expressed by this indignant outcry: ‘That’s pure idiocy. They can’t understand English so you give them less English? It makes no sense’. Something in the Japanese psyche would then be cited as the

reason behind the madness: ‘Japanese have a real fear of entering into another language, so they stick to their mother tongue. It comes from fear of confronting complex ideas from other cultures. It also comes from a need to try to control things’. This psychoanalysis then narrows down to Japanese academics who are described as “insecure” because they ‘try to justify their work by saying they must teach it in Japanese’, though the accusation of ‘mandating a job for themselves’ can cut both ways.

Native speaker teachers claimed that they had successfully taught literature in English through an interactive, not passive, approach to texts and by perpetually challenging students’ thinking because ‘there is a lot to unlearn before learning can begin’. This was done with the conviction that students ‘thrive on this approach’, that they ‘desire for more challenging content’. Challenges of using English were met by ‘explaining complex philosophical or aesthetic issues in non-complex terms...by friendly positive patience...regular in-class individual presentation practice, intellectual group discussion monitored and shepherded by me, and sustained and appropriate out-side-class reading of critical texts summarised in note form and checked by then discussed with myself’. Upon perusing the teachers’ plans on paper and their execution in class it is clear they did this but the process involved a lot of walking through with the students and a lot of thinking through. Judging by the rather simplistic analysis presented by the students in class, literature teachers teaching in English do need to maintain that ‘friendly positive patience’ to succeed.

It is quite clear that there is generally a serious lack of English proficiency among Japanese university students. What is not clear is whether there is any consensus on what to do to arrest the problem. Already opinions were divided between Japanese teachers and native speaker teachers, to start with, on matters of medium and methodology. While both sides of the divide acknowledged the problems of student proficiency, each had their own way of dealing with these linguistic challenges so that they could get on with the business of teaching literature. There is no doubt they were all committed teachers working for the best interests of their students according to their own convictions. And nowhere was this more clearly demonstrated than in the seminar rooms.

#### TEACHING APPROACHES

What can be gathered from interviews and class-observations is that it is difficult to identify and isolate teaching methods used and give each of them a name due to the eclectic way they are used in combination in a single lesson. The clearly differentiated reading approaches that fill up the pages of books on critical theory look neat on paper but go chaotic on the ground. Practicing teachers do not intellectualise their methodology and are loath to admit that they are following this or that approach or are even conscious that their lessons unfold according to some theory of text-analysis. Their responses range from ‘I have never thought of the rationale’ to ‘I used a mixed bag of tricks’, which rightly portray the image of teachers confronted with practical realities on the ground and going intuitively by what works well at a particular point with a particular group of students. That is why they only talked of what they actually did in class, how they engineered discussions, or organised group work, which are strictly teaching strategies rather than reading approaches to texts. The approaches are the not-said principles behind the strategies and lurking between the lines, hiding in the subtext, beyond the details of the interviews.

A researcher needs to bring some kind of interpretation to this wealth of data; otherwise discussion on methods may degenerate into individual classroom chronicles. The myriad details obtained need to be decoded into some recognisable reading approach in literature teaching. After sifting through the details of the practical classroom procedures from teacher-interviews and class-observations, I have discovered that the teachers were, in

fact, only using two broad approaches to literature: the *yakudoku* approach that started in 8<sup>th</sup> Century Japan and the reading methods of American New Criticism that had its beginnings in Britain in the 1920s.

#### THE *YAKUDOKU* APPROACH

*Yakudoku* is used for teaching both language and literature at present. Two nation-wide surveys by the Japan Association of College English teachers show 70-80% of Japanese teachers in high schools and universities use this method (Koike et.al 1983, 1985 cited in Norris 1994, pp 25-38). In the context of foreign literature teaching, the basic method consists of the teacher providing the model translation, correcting the accuracy of the students' translation and conducting lectures in which interpretations of plot, theme, character and semantic meaning are self-dictated.

In the universities I visited, *Yakudoku* was the basic approach adopted by Japanese teachers for courses on Shakespeare. Shakespeare is a staple in any English Studies program in Japanese universities and high on the must-do list of literature majors. Teachers interviewed were Shakespeare specialists who had had a long experience teaching Shakespearean plays, almost always educated abroad, fluent in English but were, nevertheless, teaching in Japanese for reasons already explained. The normal routine would be that students would translate a Shakespearean play page by page into Japanese and then present the translation in class. The teacher would then comment on the accuracy of the translation as a sign of comprehension or the lack of it. Without working through the translation, a teacher told me 'there is no understanding' of the text because it is only through translation that 'we can learn about other cultures...it is not just a process of translation but trans-culture'. The rationale given for such a detailed study, done at a slow rate of one play per semester, was that 'a text is only a representative of other texts' and once the technique of reading Shakespeare was mastered thoroughly with the first text, the mastery would stand in good stead for all other Shakespearean texts to come.

The *yakudoku* method used in literature teaching has now, however, been liberalised by its practitioners to accommodate student response, discussion and even dissent. The translation routine is still there, but most teachers have become less autocratic and less likely to push for their own interpretations without good reason and more likely to give their students a fair hearing first. Furthermore, the old method of translation is often complemented by the use of modern technology to provide an audio-visual reconstruction of the literary period for context. In one class, I sat through the digital sound-bites of the chorus songs of *Twelfth Night* and viewed excerpts from three film productions of the same play as well as its *kabuki* version on DVD. Sometimes, though, too much explaining can be counter-productive. Information overload can kill the passion in a Shakespearean dialogue as when a teacher, in a class I audited, over-explained the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*; by the time he was done, the magic was gone and the words ceased to breathe because they were explained to death.

Another instance of liberalising the *yakudoku* approach for Shakespeare was by occasionally replacing word-by-word translation with summarising activities, which seemed to be an equally daunting task. What facilitated it, though, was a prior video viewing of the play, the writer's biography and documentaries on the Elizabethan age, all of which had subtitles in Japanese. Because it was an introductory course open to students from any faculty, the teacher decided to use a soft approach that would not frighten off the uninitiated by merely asking them to express their individual emotional responses to aspects of the play and even allowing them to choose whatever topic interested them out of their reading. The medium was 100% Japanese, but if a student was from the English Department, the reading

was done in English. This course is an independent course and not part of the English language program.

It would be a different scenario in a foreign culture program with the study of the language as an essential part of it. I observed a teacher in the program teaching in Japanese and using American literature as a double-edged tool for both English language teaching and as an introduction to literature. He claimed his method was ‘50% on how to read and 50% on how to discuss’. In a proper literature seminar class for English majors, though, he would go beyond language and take the time and trouble to explain some relevant literary concepts including differences in reading perspectives according to gender and race, for a little widening of the horizon in what was otherwise a closed and rigid approach to teaching. The moral of the story in this section is that there are many ways to skin a cat and a traditional approach like *yakudoku* can be adapted and even re-invented by creative practitioners.

#### THE NEW CRITICISM APPROACH

Practical Criticism is the pedagogical procedure in New Criticism which requires students of literature to be trained to concentrate on and to extract information from the words on the page in front of them. The fact that, as a reader, you are Japanese, a woman, a Shintoist, from a lower-class, or from the Ainu tribe, does not matter at all. The objective is to understand the ‘literariness’ or the formal properties of literary language and to recognise the value of writers who use ordinary language in extraordinary ways. This method lends itself extremely well to the teaching of poetry which stresses the importance of constructing meanings derived from analysing the poet’s negotiations with literary devices like metaphor, symbols, rhyme, rhythm, assonance, alliteration etc., all integral to a successful poetic performance.

I sat through an undergraduate class seminar on British Romantic and Victorian poetry, conducted in English by a British expatriate lecturer. The course, according to the course description given, attempted to find meaningful connections and contradictions between these two schools of writing. In order to do this, ‘selected poems from writers of each period will be read closely’ and students would be guided on ‘the way in which poetry in English should be read, and how this might differ from the kinds of reading with which students might be familiar’. The unfamiliar seems to be referring to how poetry uses ordinary language in extraordinary ways, perhaps different from the referential language of academic textbooks that students are used to. In this particular seminar, students were earlier given copies of nine poems, three each by Browning, Bronte and Rossetti, accompanied by three questions based on the poems. At the session, students presented their take on the poems in front of them while the teacher clarified certain points with close reference to the texts. Occasionally, he had to reconstruct his students’ rather clumsy and scattered responses for clarity.

The same thing happened at another seminar in modern and contemporary British poetry. This time, seven poems by Ted Hughes were given out together with four questions on them, each ending with ‘Give examples from at least three poems to illustrate and support your opinion’. Two sample questions should suffice to show how close reading of the poetic language used is required for this practical criticism on the poems given.

- Judging from his poetry (not his biography) what kind of a man do you think Hughes was, and why? Give examples from at least three poems to illustrate and support your opinion.
- How does Hughes use symbolism in his poems, and what is he trying to achieve through symbolism? Give examples from at least three poems to illustrate and support your opinion.

As can be seen, the practical criticism approach of New Criticism creates a little space for personal response and interactive communication although it is strictly text-based.

Theme-hunting is a teaching method in practical criticism that anchors class discussion or text-analysis on a specific idea or issue, not necessarily through page-by-page close reading in class but by finding evidence in larger actions or events to connect the dots, so to speak. This exercise is based on the assumption that students have read the text and understood the basic plot before any discussion can take place. It further requires the students to sit back and view the work as a whole and search for connections between the parts that can be used as building blocks for the larger theme or issue in question.

I audited a theme-hunting seminar class on Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, a postmodern novel about modern society's fear of death after an airborne toxic event. In the previous session, the American expatriate lecturer had already given out a set of leading questions to keep the discussion on track. He started discussion by writing the word 'fear' and asking students to contribute other words related to the idea as well as its opposite. Soon the board was filled with words and there was a discussion as to how to make connections between these ideas and the main idea of fear of death. The class was then divided into groups to work out the connections in detail with reference to *White Noise* to be presented at the next session.

Given the proficiency of the students (I interviewed six of them after the seminar), one could not expect their presentation to go beyond the limits of their linguistic and literary competence, but the essential technique of constructing the thematic structure of a novel would have been grasped by making them do a lot of thinking on their own. This was precisely the objective of their teacher's classroom strategy of making sure 'that the materials are presented, worked through, discussed, and re-discussed thoroughly'. Central to the strategy was his perception of his role as a teacher 'to make connections, push for more thinking, offer bigger frameworks and respond to what students bring...They need to be creative and critical'. Done in thematic chunks this way, students could 'finish' about 4 novels in a semester.

By no means was this teaching method exclusive to courses conducted in English only. I audited a Shakespeare seminar class in Japanese where the grammar-translation routine was replaced by student play-read sessions in English followed by explanations and interactive discussions in Japanese. What helped the seminar move the day's topic was the pre-class handouts of detailed commercially prepared notes, online articles and previous video viewing of the play as performance. Students had also researched the Elizabethan theatre scenario and presented their reports in a previous session. According to the teacher, his main objective as a Shakespeare teacher was to make his students think about Shakespeare's plays as performance, whether it could move them and for them to ask why. His focus was on the literary form of drama. Surprisingly, at the particular seminar class that I attended, his students' responses to the question of theme in *Twelfth Night* were quite perceptive: their concepts of love, unrequited/unfulfilled love, disguise/mask, divine plans and gender, expressed in English for my benefit, were mostly adequately explained.

The moral lesson for this section is: if you are going to teach in English, you need to have all the patience you can muster to meet the linguistic challenges and all the support system you can get in the shape of audio-visual material and a lot of complementary print-outs.

#### MANAGING PROBLEMS OF METHODOLOGY AND TEXTS

The two approaches mentioned are probably considered by their practitioners as the best way to deal with students who come to them from the school system with limited proficiency. However, each approach is used to solve the given problem in different ways. The *Yakudoku* practitioners managed the problem by either treating translation as a tool to improve English

proficiency (at least in reading and writing) or by treating English literature as a foreign cultural product that could be studied in any language. At one end, some teachers were convinced that, given the students' level of proficiency, there could be no comprehension without translation. At the other end, others talked of the necessity 'to increase awareness that studying English literature ... should not be seen as a tool to build language proficiency' because to do this was 'to fundamentally misunderstand the scope and purpose of studying literature, which is a distinct discipline of its own'. But the translation regimen itself is tedious and has created robotic overdependence on electronic translators, the life-line of Japanese students. It also slows reading down to an average rate of one novel or play per semester, though in cases where Shakespearean plays published in Japanese translation are used instead, it can go up to six plays a year.

On the other hand, the New Criticism practitioners teaching in English were completely convinced that they could kill two birds with one stone. The medium of instruction coupled with close reading of the best works in the tradition are supposed to improve both linguistic and literary competence. This has met with some success in the right hands but the fact remains that it is an uphill task because of the mismatch between the EFL proficiency of Japanese learners and an imported program meant for first language proficiency. One teacher's solution was to teach 'at a level of (linguistic, textual, and intellectual/theoretical) complexity slightly below that at which I taught literature at a British university at the beginning of my career'. The teacher measured the success of his strategy by pre- and post-course performances and by 'comments on and evaluations of my courses from students themselves'.

My interviews with some students across five universities showed mixed reactions to both approaches which, in fact, reflect the complexity of the problem. Some preferred the medium to be English because English 'offers a better way of getting at expressions and mood directly' and it 'facilitates freedom of expression, enabling one to be more frank' since 'there's no need to be polite in the Japanese sense'. Needless to say, others thought the medium should be Japanese because translation 'gives better comprehension' and 'Japanese gives opportunity for freedom because it's our mother tongue ... and there's less risk of being misunderstood'. The pro-English camp said that classes in English 'have better coverage because teachers pick up main things for discussion, not go through page by page'. The pro-Japanese camp claimed it was 'necessary for Japanese teachers to explain grammar in Japanese' and they were more interested in 'how the language [of Shakespeare] differed from current usage'.

Most students, however, wanted a balance, i.e. some courses in Japanese and some in English, based on their perception that the Japanese method provided knowledge and the English method taught literariness. This need for balance also dictated teacher-preference as expressed by the following statements, representative of majority opinion:

Native speakers of English are needed as speaking models, but better if they can also speak Japanese.

In English native-speaker classes, students can express and share opinions...Active...However, they are often unable to distinguish between western and Japanese perspectives.

Japanese teachers only lecture; no discussion. Passive. Tend to push their ideas on students. But students don't mind this because teachers help them develop ideas; indeed they are sometimes influenced by their teacher's opinions which are then mixed with student's own ideas. However, student's views can't be expressed in class; the teacher will say 'I don't think so'. Anyway there's no time to argue in class...You can argue against the Japanese teachers in an exam script – there's no risk at all if you do it in writing – but not in class, maybe because the teacher doesn't want to be undermined in

class for he is an authority figure. Anyway, it is not in Japanese culture to argue with an authority figure in public.

So the ideal situation is to have both Japanese and English native speakers.

Therein lies, I suppose, the present management of the problem. In addition, the program structure that includes several introductory and survey courses also helps provide useful background information and context to help students negotiate cultural terrains so different from their own. Some of these courses go under different names such as *American Literary History*, *Topics in British Culture*, *Topics in American Culture*, *Literary History & Literary Theory*, and *History of English Culture*. Even so, some students said they found such courses ‘mere information-giving’, ‘boring’ and ‘do not connect’. I observed a few of these lectures, usually delivered to a big audience of mixed students from various departments. There was one on Raphaelite Art (in Japanese), and another on Robert Rauchenberg’s art (in English); interesting though these were in themselves, they did not offer any direct link to the Victorian poetry or contemporary American fiction students were studying. Unless the teachers picked up the threads again in the following seminar and deliberately made the connections, the lectures would be just an isolated event to the students and their significance or relevance lost on them.

The problem is further compounded by the choice of difficult texts from the canon of English Studies in universities of the inner circle (UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia). For instance, Shakespeare is temporally too distant, as well as too linguistically and culturally alien for the comfort of Japanese students, and yet it is what is most coveted by the students themselves for its bragging-rights value. Besides, there are a lot of Shakespeare specialists around who have been teaching the Bard for years and seem to have genuine pride doing it. So it looks like Shakespeare, and other writers who were equally difficult, white and dead, will be around for a long time as long as there is English Studies, even if it kills the students. What literature teachers have done to ease the problem is to provide students with extra reading/viewing materials and to simplify all conceptual complexities that fuel discussions in the seminar-rooms of the inner circle.

## CONCLUSION

It would seem that in Japan, western texts are valorised products from a revered literary tradition considered worthy of study even at great odds to both teachers and students. It does not seem to matter that these texts have been plucked from the canon of English Studies programs in British or American universities and are then transplanted almost lock, stock and barrel to local institutions. Whatever post-transplant problems that consequently arose out of the mismatch, whether it is lack of proficiency or foreignness of text and context, have to be sorted out by the academic system and the sheer passion of teachers. This is variously done by beefing up language courses to close the proficiency-gap, by using a translation-based methodology or the close-reading approach to bridge the comprehension-gap, and also by offering a series of introductory courses to fill up the knowledge-gap. These efforts are commendable and have achieved varying degrees of success.

One reason for Japanese worship of F.R. Leavis’ idea of the Great Tradition might be that non-colonised countries like Japan do not carry the sort of postcolonial resistance and angst that bedevil former colonised nations in Asia, Africa and the West Indies. The acceptance of a foreign language, literary tradition and culture in the Japanese classroom is not complicated by any bitter historical episode with any English-speaking power. After all, it was their own emperor (Meiji) who sought to introduce the Language to court and country as

a tool to access western technology for modernisation. It was exactly what the Japanese wanted, not something externally forced upon them. It was a top-down decree from within, not a foreign pressure from without. Maybe the absence of a colonial legacy has also given Japanese teachers the belief and complacency that Japanese values and identity are impregnable to western influence and so need no resistance.

Yet most Japanese lecturers I spoke to became uncomfortable and overly defensive about teaching English texts in Japanese. There are enough linguists around who have discredited the practice. According to Holliday (2005, p.10), these linguists dictate that every step be taken “to ensure that other languages are not allowed to interfere with the learning of English, and that the ‘native speaker’ is the best person to teach English worldwide”. This means that interference by one’s mother tongue is to be avoided like the plague and English native-speakers should be hired to provide models for authenticity. To get native speaker models, Japan went headlong into the native speakerism project and hired qualified or unqualified *gaijin* teachers by the thousands.

That is why Japanese teachers who need to deal with practicalities on the ground find themselves on the defensive for flouting this rule set in faraway lands in the west. By the same token, Japanese English Literature teachers are equally apologetic about using the grammar-translation method which has also been discredited by western scholars despite the fact that foreign language teaching in Britain was for a long time based on the same method. The notion that the ideal teacher is a native speaker is a notion supported by Noam Chomsky that, according to Holliday (2005, p. 6), has resulted in a negative self-perception of those labeled non-native speaker, hence the reference to their sense of insecurity made by that expatriate native speaker teacher in a university in Tokyo mentioned earlier.

Other studies, however, have shown that local non-native teachers are an invaluable factor in effective language acquisition. One of the scholars who speaks of this native speaker fallacy is Seidhofer (1999) who maintains that “non-native teachers [and their students] have been through the process of learning the same language...through the same ‘filter’....This shared language experience should thus constitute the basis for non-native teachers’ confidence, not their insecurity”(1999, p. 238).

Expatriate teachers in Japan speak of Asian culture being in the way of interactive learning and critical thinking among their students. They have been repeatedly characterised as being excessively obedient to authority figures, unresponsive in class, uncritical and unreflective when they do respond, and perpetually haunted by the fear of making mistakes, being ridiculed and losing face. These constitute a deadly combination that will instantly kill classroom interaction activities before they could even start. For how can a class debate on Hamlet’s flip-flop decisions or on Lady Macbeth’s ‘Unsex me here’ speech if students are too shy or too afraid to speak up. These cultural barriers must be taken down, they say.

It is said in expatriate circles that the Japanese student’s reticence or unwillingness to be conspicuously opinionated in class has been attributed to the cultural rule that the nail that sticks up gets hammered down (*deru kugi wa utareru*). This is the Japanese way of maintaining group dynamics and harmony. Expatriate teachers are ready to jump on aspects of local culture as the most common denominator for classroom failure. But it may be possible to think of the cause for an unsuccessful class interaction to be outside the control of these cultural inhibitions. For instance, in his damning evidence for a failure in Japanese higher education, McVeigh (2001) believes that “it could be a ‘vague fear’ resulting from a specific kind of schooling focused on taking examinations rather than spontaneous learning”. The argument is that Japanese teachers must not automatically accept what mainstream expatriate-teacher thinking is about the failure of their students without examining their own methodology first. After all, they should display the same critical self-examination and self-reflection that they themselves expect from their students.

The truth is, silence in Asian societies is a cultural sign of respect from the listener to the speaker, especially significant if the speaker is an older person or someone of high social status such as a teacher. The Japanese concepts of gratitude to parents/teachers and considerateness to others train both teachers and students to avoid confrontation, competition and conflict in their relationships. Being obedient to teachers and not challenging their authority is a practice highly valued in Japanese society. That being so, instead of bringing down the cultural barriers just so an interactive class can take off, local scholars and practicing teachers should try to work out a teaching methodology that can train students to argue with decorum and not convert a debate into an assault in the name of intellectual freedom and intellectual honesty. Unfortunately, there is no alternative methodology or critical theory in Japanese universities that can take into account students' own culture without making intellectual compromises. This local perspective input will provide the much needed balance in the interface between two cultures.

Literature teaching must also move with the times. The old text-centered New Criticism approach that dwells on literariness will find itself caught in a time-warp while irreversible socio-economic-political events swirl around the globe. Debates on global issues are raging out there, indifferent to either the practice or the pursuit of literary criticism. The politics of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity as well as the politics of difference, multiculturalism, pluralism and marginality should be an integral part of literary studies (Gupta 2009).

Contemporary critical theories, informed by Linguistics, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Politics have the tools that can make literature become socially relevant. It has also enabled literary intellectuals on the margins in Asia to speak up. Indeed, some have called for an opening up of the Anglo-American canon to the literature of the marginalised identities. Others have already published their own critical approaches as counter-discourse to western theories of reading. And there are debates on the prospect of a globalised English Studies that de-centers its location from its Anglophoneness.

In order to understand the complexities of present day issues, there should be some adjustments in teaching methodology in the EFL context where limited English proficiency is unable to cope with the new demands of literary studies. Under these circumstances, such complexities can be better understood through the translation approach and the use of native language so that the course can be made relevant to immediate local realities and everyday life. English Studies can then become a site where local perspective can be foregrounded by frames of references provided by the discipline. Used this way, English Studies can be the site to engage local concerns which can then be brought to global forums.

This paper argues for giving real, practical options for literature teachers to choose what works best for their students. It also argues for local perspectives to inform reading so that both students and teachers can take on board their local specificities in the process of meaning-making.

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