

# Literature as a Tool College English in Non-host Language Environments

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## 1. Pedagogical Problems

Learning English and becoming competent in it in Japan is difficult for many reasons. Some people, admitting the fact, may hold that it is because English is taught by the grammar-translation method. Then, as a matter of course, they further relate it to the question of using literary texts as teaching materials. There have been debates over the appropriateness of using literary texts in teaching English. Using literary texts together with the grammar-translation method has solely born the blame for the Japanese students' inability in communicating in English. Overall, including college English, of course, many people have recommended a shift of emphasis from the teaching of the language system, whether using literary texts or not, to the teaching of the actual social uses. We must note, however, there are some people who strongly advocate that college English courses should be designed primarily for the students' intellectual development; thus the practical side is secondary. I won't go into the discussion of pros and cons of this conviction as it deviates from the purpose of this paper. So far incessant efforts have been made in the pedagogical field, and a number of teaching methods have been explored far and wide. Most of them take as their primary goal the ability of enabling students to communicate using the target language. For example, (1) direct method, (2) audio-lingual method, (3) silent way, (4) suggestopedia, (5) community language learning, (6) total physical response method, (7) communicative approach. Larsen-Freeman (1986) introduces these seven methods along with the grammar-translation method in her *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Let's take up the

communicative approach, the most talked about and fashionable, in Larsen-Freeman book as an example to see how it's conducted in the actual classroom.

The class consists of twenty immigrant students who have lived in the United States for two years and are at a high-intermediate level of English proficiency. The goal of the teacher is clear : to have the students become communicatively competent. Activities involved in the method are as such :

(1) language games

For example, the teacher divides the class into small groups, each containing five students. He hands each group a deck of thirteen cards. Each card has a picture of a piece of sports equipment. As the students identify the items, the teacher writes each name on the blackboard—basketball, tennis, skis, etc. The cards are shuffled and four of the students in a group are dealt three cards each. They do not show their cards to anyone else. The extra card is placed face down in the middle of the group. The fifth person in each group receives no cards. She is told that she should try to predict what it is that A, one of the students in the class, will be doing the following weekend. The fifth student makes statements like “A may go skiing this weekend.” If one of the members of this group has a card showing skis, the group members would reply, “He can't go skiing, because I have his skis.” If no one has the picture of skis, then the fifth student can make a strong statement about the likelihood of A's going skiing. She can say, “A will go skiing.” She can check her prediction by turning over the card that was placed face down.

(2) role-plays

(3) problem-solving tasks

The teacher tells the students to imagine that they are all employees of the same company. One of them is the boss. They are having a meeting to discuss what will possibly occur as a result of their company merging with another company.

In the above-mentioned activities English is a vehicle for classroom

communication, not just the object of study. The students in the class have already acquired higher proficiency in English. The important point here, however, is not the level of the students' proficiency but that they are immersed in the English-speaking environment in their everyday life. Furthermore, the students' native languages are varied, so the only way for them to communicate with one another is to use English. What will happen when we use the same method in an English class in Japan? It is not so hard for us to imagine the scene in which the students are talking in Japanese all the time. Mere prohibition of using Japanese does not work. The majority of students with the least enthusiasm are silent and indifferent to what is going on in class. In the first place the games themselves do not interest college students unless they are to be carried out completely in English. Are the students to blame for their lack of enthusiasm? We have to bear in mind that for the students using English instead of Japanese to talk to the classmates is unreal and even awkward. Under the present circumstances we are unable to expect great success by just applying the communicative approach in college English classes in Japan. At best the class is teacher-centered and the students speak English only when they answer the teacher's questions.

Larsen-Freeman also observed a high-intermediate class at a university in Columbia where the grammar-translation method was used. The students were reading an excerpt entitled "The Boys' Ambition" from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. According to the teacher a fundamental purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to read literature written in English. To do this students need to learn about the rules of grammar and vocabulary of English. The primary skills to be developed are reading and writing. Little attention is given to speaking and listening. The above method seems to run counter to the current trend if the aforementioned communicative approach is in fashion.

However, Hirvela (1988) points out that recently there are indications that literature is quietly reclaiming a respected role in language teaching. She maintains that "this is an encouraging development, especially for those who share Brumfit's concern about 'trivialization of language teaching.'" (p. 132) Brumfit's assertion (1985) is as follows:

“There has been a concern to insist on the language as something potentially modifiable and usable by all who operates with it, whether learners or not ; a concern with language as a vehicle for serious ideas and feelings ; a concern with education as eventually a moral and ideological business. These concerns have led to criticism of analysts’ categories in the construction of syllabus. They have also led to doubts about the trivialization of language teaching, even if it is done in the name of ‘humanism’ and resistance to the notion that market forces and education will never conflict.” (p. xi)

Widdowson (1985), in his unique study of poetry as discourse, advocates that “Although it has long been fashionable to regard poetry as irrelevant to the learning of foreign languages, it can be incorporated as an integrative element into a language course, and properly presented, it can serve as an invaluable aid in the development of communicative competence.” (p.153) Widdowson’s assertion is appealing especially when the teacher has the feeling of a lack of substance and meaning in EFL teaching materials.

## **2. Literature as an Aid for Language Learning**

Arguing against the negative opinions to the inclusion of literature in language courses, Widdowson (1986) claims the matter of purpose. Widdowson points out the following :

“It can be argued that literature contributes nothing to the utilitarian objectives of language learning. The current obsession with needs analysis and cost effective accounting which parades as pedagogy lends weight to this argument. Literature has no practical uses and so it is useless... There is no need of literature in courses designed to meet the demands of practical utility.” (p. 160)

There is more to life than safe investment of effort. If we turn our attention to the process of learning from a utilitarian purpose, literature presents before us a rich source of human discourse. Widdowson (1986) maintains that literature is a potentially disruptive influence in the well-ordered world of the carefully controlled language course. Certainly, suppose the students are accustomed to reading such sentences in class,

“Bill,” she called, “wake up. It’s after 7:30. What’s the matter? Today isn’t a holiday, is it?”

“No, Mother,” answered Bill, “but I can’t get up. I have a terrible headache. My head aches, my eyes ache, my back aches, my arms ache, and my legs ache. My whole body aches. I can’t get up.”

“Stay in bed, then,” said his mother. “I’ll get some medicine. You probably have the flu. I can write a note to your teacher.”

and suddenly they are introduced to something like the following:

“I’m sick. My nose is stuffed up and I have a sore throat. Even ice cream tastes terrible. Didi brought me a pint of butter pecan (my favorite), and I even couldn’t eat it. She can be nice sometimes...

Mutsie brought me my homework but Mom wouldn’t let her into my room because she might catch what I’ve got. She stood in the door but we couldn’t talk about anything because Mom was standing there too. Mr. H. sent some books on anthropology but they’re boring.”

(Hila Coleman: *Diary of a Frantic Kid Sister*)

What are the fundamental differences between these two excerpts? Human touch and feeling are absent in the former while the latter shows the complexity of human nature. In the former vocabulary is carefully chosen and the sentence structures are also constructed to meet standards (apparently the students are to learn the usage of “ache”), whilst in the latter the style and the vocabulary are more spontaneous. The important point is that the latter stimulates the students’ imagination and also incurs interests in what’s going on. Surely the world is full of unexpected happenings. Thus having the students immersed in the story told in English is requisite when they are isolated from the English speaking community. Littlewood’s assertion (1986), “the role of onlookers,” (p. 179) looking at the event created by language - literature, is a valuable suggestion.

Widdowson (1986) shows us a very “unique” and “paradoxical” investigation. “Having got rid of literature, material writers proceed to invent their own. Textbooks are full of fictions. ‘Mr. and Mrs. Brown, son David, daughter Mary pursuing the dreary round of their diurnal life, breakfast, lunch, tea, and supper, father reading his newspaper in the

sitting room, mother in the kitchen, the children in the garden, the cat on the mat, God's in his Heaven, all's right with the world.” (p. 162)

Let's take a look at an all's-right-with-the-world example from a reading lesson book.

“Look at this picture. (At the top of the page there is the picture of a family sitting in the living room.) This is Mr. & Mrs. Lee, Bill and Ann. They live in San Francisco, California. Mr. Lee is a math teacher. Bill and Ann are students... They are in the living room now. Mr. Lee is reading a book. Bill is studying English and Ann is studying math. Do you see the cat? They call it “Puff.” (*Reading Lessons in the English as a Second Language*)

Unfortunately, the world is not always all that quiet and secure. It's sometimes roaring. Let's contemplate on the following :

“...Mom said at dinner that she wanted to get a job...” What's the family members' reaction to Mom's desire?

“Dad said, ‘That's a wonderful idea. It's good for you to contribute to the society with your ability and skill.’ ”

If the above is the answer, with a slight disappointment we mechanically absorb the sentences. Nothing happens and we don't humanly engage in the conversation. How about the following?

“Dad looked disgusted.”

Our heart clicks. What will he say?

“ ‘That's for a spinster school teacher. I don't want my wife giving piano lessons. We don't need the money — it would be demeaning.’ ‘Demeaning to who?’ Mom was furious. ‘You don't think it's demeaning to me, a concert pianist, to be a household drudge all these years? To have to ask you for every cent I want to spend?’...” (Hila Colman : *Diary of a Frantic Kid Sister*)

I don't intend to claim that the quarrel is with the value of literature as a means to illustrate how the foreign people live. The important point here is to have the students experience the denial of expectations, which serves to stimulate their interests. If the teacher's only concern is to present the language in a carefully controlled manner through structural syllabi and to avoid any complexities, the students in most part focus

their attention at the usage level and are not much inspired to ponder on “what will come next” or to ask “why the situation should arise.” What they read are just sentences. (Povey gives values to learning vocabulary usage through literary materials.) With circumspection the introduction of something which disrupts in the step-by-step learning process is needed to add variety and relieve the students’ boredom in reading. Literature deserves more attention as a potential source of providing for such materials.

### **3. Use of Literary Texts as Linguistic Materials**

Ever since the audiolingual method appeared on the scene of teaching, literature as foreign language teaching material has been glowered upon. Most objections were linguistically based. However, Povey (1984), Widdowson (1986) and McKay (1986) have refuted linguistic objections. For example, Povey maintains that literature will increase all language skills because literature will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax and that it will often represent in a general way the style that can properly stand as a model for students. Widdowson asserts that there are two levels of linguistic knowledge: the level of usage and level of use. According to his definition, usage means a knowledge of linguistic rules, while use requires knowing how to use these rules for effective communication. Let’s take up the “present perfect vs. past tense”, one of the burdensome rules for the Japanese students. First the explanation such as follows is necessary to be given to the students:

“Use the present perfect to refer to something that began in the past and continues into the present and also to an unspecified time in the past. For or since show the duration of the event. Use the past tense to refer to something that was completed in the past.”

Then the examples are shown to make the differences clearer.

- (1) I’ve worked at the restaurant since 1987. (I work there now.)
- (2) I worked at the restaurant from 1985 to 1987. (I don’t work there anymore.)
- (3) I’ve studied English for three years. (I’m still studying English.)

- (4) I studied English when I was younger. (I'm not studying English anymore.)
- (5) "Have you seen E. T.?" "Yes, I've already seen it."
- (6) "When did you see E. T.?" "I saw it last week."

Drumming these sentences into the students' heads is not enough. These are just sentences dissociated from the social context. To compensate the absence of real events the use of literature—the application of Littlewood's "the role of onlookers" —is of great help. For instance, here are the excerpts from Salinger's short story, *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*; the following dialogue between Muriel and her mother on the phone gives us a lively example of "present perfect vs. simple past tense."

"Yes, Mother. How are you?" she said.

"I've been worried about you to death. Why haven't you phoned? Are you all right?"

I tried to get you last night and the night before. The phone here's been—"

"I'm fine. I'm hot. This is the hottest day they've had in—"

"Why haven't you called me? I've been worried to—"

"Mother, darling, don't yell at me. I can hear you beautifully," said the girl. "I called you twice last night. Once just after—"

Although it's still not in the immediate social context, with the flow of the story the students are able to have better understanding of when to use present perfect or simple past tense than only to be given grammatical explanations and model sentences. The teacher's role is important. The teacher should be alert not to overlook valuable linguistic elements in the story the class is reading.

Our success in using literature, of course, greatly depends upon a selection of texts which will not be too difficult on either a linguistic or a conceptual level. McKay (1986) is fully convinced that for all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions. Widdowson (1986) regards reading not as a reaction to a text but as an interaction between writer and reader mediated through the text. Our teaching/learning environment is a hard one because of the absence of natural exposure opportunities. The host

language environment has a distinguishing advantage to permit learners to talk with native-speaking peers about issues relating to their lives. Widdowson, McKay, and others, however, show us the ways to compensate the absence of natural exposure; if the focus of learners is on the content of the material, literary texts have such perspectives, and the language environment is highly closer to being “natural.”

*Supplementary note*

I mentioned earlier in this paper the difficulties of learning English in Japan, and its widely believed cause. And also the mere prohibition of using Japanese in the classroom very often does not work. Taniguchi (1988), in his analysis on the causes of the Japanese students' errors in English, draws our attention to the Japanese teachers' inflexible attitudes towards the students' errors. Such attitudes, according to Taniguchi, derive from the oral-approach and the “traditional” grammar-translation method. In the use of “all's-right-with-the-world” type materials, the student's product such as “He goed Hawaii last summer” may not be acceptable. Using this type of materials the teachers' focus tends not to go beyond the usage level of English to the content of the students' products. (According to Widdowson (1988) “usage” is one aspect of performance in which the language user demonstrates his knowledge of linguistic rules.) What Taniguchi points out as undesirable effects caused by the teachers' inflexible attitudes towards errors are as follows:

(1) Cause shyness

Because of the embarrassing experience in making errors in class, most students in fear of making errors, check themselves from speaking out when they meet a native speaker of English.

(2) Interfere acquisition of English

The learner's emotional states are important as pointed out by Krashen.\* Because of the strong sense of fear of making errors, the students are unable to acquire English.

(3) Utter meaningless sentences

Because of the strong fear of making errors, the students tend to avoid creative and dynamic communication and continue to

uttering banal and superficial expressions.

(4) Interfere fluency

To avoid making errors the students' attention is drawn to an individual word or phrase at the expense of fluency, so that it's difficult for the listener to follow and be interested in the conversations.

Taniguchi's assertion illustrates the problems clearly, but it seems fundamentally irrelevant to the teaching methods or materials. The deep-rooted cultural aspects should be studied seriously. Generally, the Japanese students are shy about expressing their opinions in front of others even in their native language. Besides, the monoethnic society makes it possible that they get away without verbal communication. The Japanese children get extraordinarily self-conscious when they have to communicate with grown-ups outside their families. They go into their puberty without having much training of "speech" and learning the meaning of communication.

\* Krashen states in *Language Tow* (by Dulay, H., But, M., and Krashen, S. 1982. Oxford: Oxford University Press) that the less anxious the learner, the better language acquisition proceeds and relaxed and comfortable students apparently can learn more in shorter periods of time.

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