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## Practice-Oriented Paper

# Go and Open the Door: Literature in the University English Classroom

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Incorporating literature into the university level English curriculum may present challenges for the teacher, such as finding level-appropriate and available texts. However, educators are encouraged to “go and open the door” and use literature as a resource for language learning and as means of creating opportunities for students’ skill development. Research has shown that in addition to language learning, literature can increase student engagement and motivation, and can be a catalyst for change and empathy by engaging students with universal themes and real-world situations. This article will propose three ways to make connections to literature through academic or personal interests, contemporary society, and cultural exploration. Suggested poems and classroom activities will be given, including specific examples of pairing literary works with other types of texts, designing language learning activities for the four skills, using scaffolding to aid learner comprehension, and using research as a basis for creative work. These examples will be drawn from a university level literature class on poetry.

*“Go and open the door. Maybe outside there’s a tree, or a wood, a garden, or a magic city”*  
(Holub, 2006).

There are a number of ways to approach the study of literature in the English classroom. Carter and Long (1991) outlined the use of literature for studying language and culture and for personal development. By reading literature, students are exposed to authentic language with an array of vocabulary, sentence structures, and connective devices; moreover, they employ reading strategies, especially making inferences and guessing meaning from context (Collie & Slater, 2001). In terms of culture, “... literature does seem to provide a way of contextualizing how a member of a particular society might behave or react in

a specific situation”; however, the author argues for the critical examination of culture portrayed in literature in order to avoid generalizations or stereotypes (Lazar, 1993, p. 17). Students can use literature for personal development by deciding which areas of the reading or reading process to examine in further depth, or by discussing their own feelings and experiences related to the text (Parkinson & Reid Thomas, 2000).

In addition to providing opportunities for linguistic, cultural, and personal development, literature is authentic material on universal human themes (Khatib & Rahimi, 2012). If students are motivated, their engagement with the text can increase as they become immersed in the plot and invested in the characters (Collie & Slater, 2001). Literary texts can add variety and offer students the opportunity to use language creatively. Finally, reading literature can assist with the development of intercultural understanding, and even serve as a catalyst for change and empathy with other groups of people (Khatib, Derakhshan, & Rezaei, 2011). These are compelling reasons to use literature as a part of English language curriculum.

However, there can be challenges associated with the use of literature for teachers. The first is lack of class time to include additional activities, such as reading poems, short stories, or novels. If teachers are preparing students for standardized exams or teaching a coordinated curriculum, they may not have institutional support to teach literary content. Incorporating literature in the curriculum does not mean that other text types and language learning activities will not be used (Khtib & Nourzaden, 2011). Literature can be paired with other types of texts; for example, teachers can assign a poem and a news article on similar themes. The second challenge for teachers is finding literature that is accessible and appropriate for the specific group of learners. Yilmaz (2012), and Khatib and Nourzaden (2011) developed lists of factors to consider when selecting literary texts, including students’ varied interests, as well as points related to the text itself: length, genre, theme, classic status, availability, language, and culture. When considering the items in this list, it is necessary to be familiar with program and student needs in order to choose the most appropriate reading material.

The challenges of text selection can be mitigated in several ways. One is for the teacher to read widely, keeping an eye out for potential class texts and seeking out recommendations from other educators. The International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) Literature Special Interest Group is one organization dedicated to providing resources for teachers interested in using the arts in their classrooms. In Japan, likeminded professionals can be found in various communities, for example the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Literature in Language Teaching Special Interest Group (LiLT SIG) and the Liberlit Conference which brings together university educators who advocate the importance of literature in the university English classroom (Liberlit, n.d.). Another efficient way to find classroom materials is to use a commercial textbook like *Real Reads: An Introduction to Literature* (Nakanishi, Bibby, & Ota, 2014) that includes texts, activities, and explanations of literary elements used in each piece so that students can discuss literature effectively. In addition, ready-made poetry lesson plans can also be found online at the following websites: Poetry Foundation, Academy of American Poets, The National Council of Teachers of English, Asymptote for Educators, and Words Without Borders Campus.

## **Teaching context**

This article describes how poetry has been used in a course that is part of a university English language program in Japan. When students matriculate, they are placed into the low or high stream English classes and all students are required to take two years of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. In the high stream, students are required to take the following courses: reading, writing, seminar, listening, presentation, and special topics. The special topics course is taken in the second year, after students have developed foundational English skills and is an opportunity to study academic content in English. The course goals are to practice the skills learned in other English courses, engage in research, and participate in small group discussion. The teacher is free to choose the theme for the course, and these have included literature, environmental studies, behavioral economics, disaster management, and film studies. There are five or six sections of

the special topics course offered each semester and students can choose the topic that they think is most interesting. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes and class size varies from 18 to 30 students.

In this context, students are not English language or literature majors. Therefore, in order to open the door to literature and underscore the relevance and currency of poetry, everyday life and the themes of literature are connected. This article presents three ways to establish this relationship: linking poems with students' academic or personal interests, contemporary society, and cultural exploration.

## **Making connections: Academic or personal interests**

If teachers design a literature course that is part of an established English curriculum, they can relate the skills used in a poetry course with the language skills that students have learned and activities they have done in other classes. For instance, one familiar starting point for students is reading adapted academic articles or newspaper reports. Therefore, students can start by reading a nonfiction piece about the poet with information about his or her life and work for homework; this article can also preview some of the vocabulary, literary elements, or themes included in the poems. For example, in preparation to read *The Great Figure* (Williams, 1921), students read information about the author who worked as both a poet and a doctor, and wrote about American subject matter. They also learn definitions of vocabulary (the multiple meanings of “figure”), and basic information about literary elements (the use of sensory imagery in poetry). After reading the article, students answer multiple choice questions, write down definitions for the key terms, and note points that they think are interesting about the poet's life. In this way, students are prepared to read poems because they have studied background information about the author and work, and when students come to class, they are ready to read, discuss, and listen to the poems. This process incorporates the four skills and helps to alleviate some of the possible challenges of using poetry in the classroom by scaffolding new vocabulary and other areas, such as unfamiliar settings or literary techniques.

In other teaching contexts, where courses are not connected, a link could be made between poetry and the textbook's unit themes or required activities. Poems can be used to supplement English textbooks to provide students with authentic input and add variety to the lessons. *Knoxville, Tennessee* (Giovanni, 1968) is an easy to read poem that works well with units on food, family, or vacation; it could also be used in an introductory lesson after summer vacation. In the poem, several foods and feelings associated with home are listed. Asking students to discuss and write about their summer vacation in the form of a poem would provide an alternative to a typical first lesson at the beginning of the fall semester. Another poem titled *Oranges* (Soto, 1983) pairs well with units focused on talking about the past or telling a story. In this poem, a man recalls a memory from when he was twelve years old, so students could read the poem, notice the use of the past tense, and talk about an interesting memory of their own. If class time is short, alternatively, poems can simply be included on the classroom handouts, and students who are interested can read them on their own for an enrichment activity.

Poetry can also be connected to students' academic or personal interests. Students studying science may be interested in poems dealing with scientific themes and containing subject specific vocabulary; *Power* (Rich, 2013) is about the Nobel Prize winning scientist Marie Curie and *Not Nothing* (Hahn, 2015) is a short poem about the brain. With regards to students' personal interests or hobbies, Kitzman (2016) found that one of the most popular topics for Japanese university students is music. Many poems are related to music, either in their subject matter or use of literary techniques. *Kasala for Myself* (Mujila, 2017) or *Lenox Avenue Midnight* (Hughes, 1926), include references to jazz music and musicians. The author of *Remember* (1983) and *She Had Some Horses* (Harjo, 2008), uses repetition and other musical elements in her poetry. Another popular topic for students is movies (Kitzman, 2016), and *The Movies* (Collins, 2000) has wide appeal because it is about the familiar activity of watching an adventure movie at home and is written with straightforward language.

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## **Making connections: Contemporary culture and**

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Connecting poetry with contemporary culture, such as social media and advertising campaigns, is another way to generate interest in reading poetry. To informally gauge whether students enrolled in the special topics poetry course have interest and experience with reading and writing poetry, students discuss several questions with a partner on the first day of class. These discussion questions include (1) Do you like to read poetry? (2) Have you ever written a poem? (3) What do you think about poetry? Although most students have previous experience studying literature in Japanese or English, some may think poetry is interesting, but others may find it difficult or even irrelevant to daily life. According to a survey of university students in central Japan, Fraser (2018) found that nearly 75% of students responded that they “like” or “very much like” reading in Japanese; however, the percentage of students who have written stories or poems in English was less than 8%.

Information about poetry and its role in contemporary society is included in the course materials. According to a survey by the National Endowment for the Arts (2018), in the United States, the poetry-reading rate was 11.7% in 2017, which is an increase from the 2012 rate of 6.7%. While the organization is still investigating the causes of this increase in poetry reading, it is believed that social media has played a role. In recent years, Instagram poets have risen to fame through posting poems, illustrations, and photographs on Instagram. Rupi Kaur’s Instagram page features her poems about womanhood, and her book *Milk and Honey* (2014) has sold millions of copies and has been translated into 25 languages, including Japanese (Mzezewa, 2017). Poetry can also be found trending on Twitter, and Ward (2016) reports that amidst gun violence and injustice in United States in 2016, poems were shared on social media. For instance, the first lines of *Tired* (Hughes, 1931) “I am so tired of waiting / Aren’t you, / For the world to become good / And beautiful and kind?” and the last lines of *Allowables* (Giovanni, 2013) “I don’t think / I’m allowed / To kill something / Because I am / Frightened” were especially poignant. Because some poems are short enough to fit the character limits of social networking sites and these posts can easily be shared, it is possible that through technology,

poetry reaches an even larger number of readers than before. By reading these poems and learning about their connection to contemporary society, students can examine the relevance of literature across time and space.

Poetry has also reached a wider audience through advertisements on television and on the internet. Poems are often used into advertisements and these can be exploited for classroom use because they connect poetry and with familiar brands or famous people. One example is Nike advertisements which use poems written in the past paired with footage of athletes in the present. Examples of these include Nike ads using *Harlem* (Hughes, 1951) with video of Sanya Richards Ross running track and field; and *Still I Rise* (Angelou, 1978) with video of Serena Williams playing tennis. After students read and understand the poems, they can watch the videos online for additional audiovisual support. The videos provide a discussion point on how the themes of these poems connect with contemporary society; on the other hand, they might provoke a debate about the use of the artists' work for commercial purposes. This can be explored through the Nike advertisements or Under Armour's *Unlike Any* campaign. Each of the advertisements in this campaign features video of an athlete and an original poem composed by a spoken word artist. Pairings include ballet dancer Misty Copeland with slam poet and musician Saul Williams, and skier Lindsey Vaughn with spoken word poet Safia Eihillo.

## **Making connections: Cultural Exploration**

Reading and writing poetry not only enables students to learn about other cultures but also to explore their own culture. Cultural investigation and creative expression intersect when students read and write ethnographic poems. In an excerpt from *House to House*, Al Bastaki (2018) presents ethnographic research from her undergraduate thesis in poetry form. As part of this project, she interviewed people living in the Dubai Creek area about their way of life in Arabic or other languages, and then used the interview transcripts as the basis for poems which she translated into English, but with select words transliterated or left untranslated (Al Bastaki, 2018). In one poem, the speaker recalls memories related to food and in another, the speaker talks about showing her childhood

home to her children. Students read and discuss the poems, paying particular attention to the author's use of language and how these choices affect the readers' experience. In this way, students can begin exploring the connections between language, culture, and memory.

By following this example, students can conduct their own small ethnographic research projects to learn about their own culture and transform their results into poems. Gui, Hillis, Bartoszynska, and Zampino (2018a) outline the following procedure. First, students select a topic: they may choose to conduct an interview about a memory related to food, home, or another topic. Then the students make a plan and receive consent to interview a friend or family member about their topic. The interview may be conducted in the language of the interviewer or interviewee's choice, and if possible, it could be recorded. Students select a portion of the interview to use as material for their poem. This part of the interview should be transcribed and then translated to English, if it was conducted in another language. Working with the English translation, students should decide where to insert line breaks in their poem and make decisions about any words they want to transliterate or leave untranslated. After completing their project, students can share their poems and discuss their work in small groups. This type of interview and report process is similar to activities that students often perform in the language classroom; however, it gives students the additional challenge to conduct ethnographic research and to present their findings in the form of poetry.

Another way to incorporate poetry and cultural research is to study the work of Amira Hanfi, who created a 2007 project titled *Map of the Orders of Signs*. The artist walked the streets of Chicago and recorded herself reading all of the words she saw, and then used these transcripts to create not only poems but also visual representations of text that pedestrians encounter as they walk a city block (Heisler, 2018). Through reading an interview with the artist and conducting their own similar research, students can examine text in public spaces at the university or a city block with which students are familiar. Gui, Hillis, Bartoszynska, and Zampino (2018b) outline the process. First, students note examples of the language found in a public space: words on road signs,



advertisements, store fronts, and even flyers. After recording this information, students compose their own list poems (i.e., poems, which enumerate something, such as people, places, actions, and often use repetition) using the found material. Although they do not need to write any original content, they will need to make decisions about the order of information and about the format of the poem. As a follow up, students discuss their experiences composing the poems, before moving on to the broader question of how written language in these spaces conveys information, power, and behavioral expectations. This is a topic of particular relevance for students of city planning or architecture. For English language learners, the activity encourages stopping to notice the language which surrounds them in daily life; in addition, students can check for multi-language signs which have become increasingly important as Japan hosts more foreign visitors and international events.

## **Conclusion**

Three ways for opening the door to literature in the English language classroom have been discussed in this article. One way is to become more familiar with the needs and interests of the students in the class and connect them with students' academic majors or personal hobbies. Another way is to connect poems to advertising, social networking, or other forms of digital media. Cultural exploration is yet another way and it combines reading a poem from another country with conducting inquiry into one's own culture.

A variety of poems related to each of these ways of opening to the door to literature has been recommended, and these can be used to engage students with both authentic literary texts and real-world issues. Effective lesson plans revolve around not only the literary texts, but also small group discussion of the ideas or research on the themes presented. Although there are some challenges to finding interesting and level appropriate texts for a specific group of learners, literature offers rich potential for improving English language skills and developing academic competencies.

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