TEACHING AS COMMUNICATION: AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN ENGLISH TEACHING METHODOLOGY FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS AT A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY:

READING AS COMMUNICATION*

Alan Farr

CHAPTER I

In this section it will be argued that content-based lessons centered on texts, ludic reading rather than translation, and thinking and writing rather than speaking since students lack the ability to communicate in spoken English, offer the best prospects for communicative teaching. By selecting artistically sophisticated texts with adult content and powerful, affective impact, yet accessible to students through their simple diction, the teacher can motivate students to respond enthusiastically ie., do regular homework assignments and preparation for discussing texts, the minimal condition for a communicative approach. The main organizing, pedagogical principle is “reading between the lines” for the “hidden meaning” or subtext, giving students a sense of empowerment and motivating them to communication through self-expression.

CHAPTER II

One of the most common cliches about Japanese students is the claim that, although they cannot speak English, they can read it, yet to anyone who has taught reading in a Japanese university such a claim is absurd. As one Japanese professor obliquely explains: “they can handle the literal, mechanical translation of English sentences, but understanding them within a context is difficult” (Daily Yomiuri, Jan.10, 1991).

Yakudoku (see Hino, 1992), ie. the translation method of reading has so permeated the education system that most students confuse reading with translation (an effective way to illustrate the difference is to give students the Japanese translation so that they

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can focus on reading). Instead of leaving L1 to comprehend an L2 text on its own terms, students translate word for word, i.e., they read the L2 text only in reference to its equivalent L1 meaning.

Using a Japanese-English dictionary (in most cases poorly) only the surface or literal meaning is translated into a version of L1 that is at best awkward, and at worst nonsense. By these methods any attempt to paraphrase or explain in English is futile. Context and situation are often only vaguely apprehended, often resulting in an almost incomprehensible Japanese gobbledy-gook.

Reading a language requires more than knowing the meaning of individual words. A knowledge of lexical use, i.e., an understanding of words in context, is more important, as is the ability to think critically and rationally, not a strong point with many students. In a poll conducted by the Japan Youth Research Center comparing the education systems of Japan and the USA of 1,093 Japanese students educated or having studied in the USA, only 1 percent responded that the Japanese system was more likely to enhance the ability to think creatively. Tellingly, 55 percent thought the Japanese system was superior in producing students capable of passing the difficult university entrance exams (Mainichi Daily News, April 11, 1993).

The majority have not developed any reading habits in English, or even in their own language; apart from magazines, comics, bestsellers, i.e. what may be termed Taishuuubungaku (popular literature), little time is devoted to more demanding reading habits such as works of criticism, philosophy, history or belles-lettres literature. This is undoubtedly partly the result of high level decisions affecting the direction of Japan’s political economy since 1945, prioritizing economic development to the detriment of the social, which has resulted in the neglect of the humanities and their low standing in society (see Horio, 1988; McCormack, 1996). Although Japanese can decode commercial, scientific and technical literature written in English, newspapers, magazines and imaginative literature are beyond the ability of most Japanese.

Students in the years preparing for the university entrance exams have neither time nor motivation to develop personal interests or hobbies or pursue intellectual inquiry outside the subjects to be examined (see Rohlen, 1983). As a result, students come ill-prepared to handle analysis, synthesis, logical thinking and coherent presentation of ideas that are associated with study at the university level.

Literary and critical response developed through discussion and composition are not taught in Japanese high schools; university students must start from scratch in developing critical thinking and aesthetic appreciation. Consequently, few students have acquired the ability to turn their reading into discourse beyond the level of a generalized personal response such as liking or disliking. Many are unaware of devices such as figurative, metaphorical language, and symbolism.

The students’ lack of experience in the critical reading of imaginative literature and consequently their low level of literary awareness require remedial measures that pose exciting challenges to a teacher attempting communicative pedagogy, since texts, especially those of a literary order, offer rich possibilities for interpretation, demanding
both analytical thought as well as full emotional engagement.

Using literature in EFL, however, is controversial, perhaps because of grammar-translation methods which have invited criticism (Eskey, 1983; Brumfit and Carter, 1986). This paper will, nevertheless, attempt to show that the interface of language and literature, including “non-fiction”, can produce positive results for communicative pedagogy in the ethical, intellectual, and aesthetic development of students.

Since Japanese staff are responsible for teaching literature to English majors who are expected to study the canon and literary history, it would be redundant and inappropriate to teach canonical texts to non-majors who, as in the case of science and engineering students, are for the most part insensitive to the virtues of the canon.

The position of literature itself in the official system of knowledge at the end of the twentieth century seems to be losing some of its authority in the triumphal wake of science and technology. Indeed, literature does not enjoy the confidence of many professors in the latter fields who are becoming increasingly vociferous in their demands for more ‘relevant’ studies and suitable texts for teaching their students English.

Thus Japanese non-majors possess neither the linguistic expertise to handle the exigencies of the canon, nor the interest and motivation required for such an arduous approach to studying English. Literature, however, may still be salvageable if it can meet the aesthetic and cognitive needs of students, and provided that ways can be found to help them develop a sensitivity for the written word; in the age of the Internet and against competition from electronic media the revelation of literature is no easy task.

The precarious situation of literature is well argued in Graf’s Literature Against Itself (1979/1995) where he claims that the bureaucratization of the American university has resulted in a de-intellectualization due to the disappearance of intellectual content. The same diagnosis may apply to the Japanese university to an even greater degree, especially regarding the poor fare of Eikaiwa or English ‘conversation’. Criticising the New Criticism movement (whose influence has been considerable in Japan) Graf quotes Richard Palmer: “Dialogue, not dissection, opens up the world of a literary work. Disinterested objectivity is not appropriate to the understanding of a literary work.”, and reading a literary work, “is not a gaining of conceptual knowledge through observation and reflection; it is an ‘experience,’ a breaking down and breaking up of one’s old way of seeing.”, so that a disinterested objectivity is impossible: “There is no privileged access to a work of literature, no access that stands outside of history and outside one’s own horizon of understanding” (Graf, 1995: 132).

The above claims underscore the communicative character of the reading act requiring the active involvement of the reader with the text in a dialogic relationship (see Holub, 1984), thus suggesting a useful role for reading literature in the language classroom.

Another powerful argument in the defense of teaching literature is suggested by the transformative powers of literature which, by virtue of the mysterious symbolic properties of words, can penetrate into the deepest recesses of the human mind where the emotions are nourished by, and therefore receptive to the forces of nature (ie., the
irrational). The anthropological explanation for the receptivity of Man's primitive consciousness to creative power in Schumaker's Literature and the Irrational (1960) is disturbingly persuasive yet also reassuring since pedagogy can take advantage of the affective elements in aesthetic experience which can trigger a cognitive transformation. Perhaps this is what Northrop Frye had in mind when he wrote (1964: 129), “It is clear that the end of literary teaching is not simply the admiration of literature; it's something more like the transfer of imaginative energy from literature to the students.”

Alvin Kernan in The Death of Literature (1990) also defends the use of literature pointing out that since the teaching of literature involves writing or uses words with “the social aim of constructing some kind of believable and acceptable Lebenswelt”, its future existence depends on the continuation of this social role. He continues (194): Literature, in turn, acquires social reality, becomes present in the world, by virtue of its participation in this project, interacting, with politics, law, technology, language, education, literacy, property, plagiarism, individual creativity, and other cultural institutions and ways of thinking about important things (my emphasis).

Kernan's stated raison d’etre of literature, its integrating role in cultural life may justify its role in the curriculum, but it needs to be made clear to students; appealing to their self-interest in order to gain their cooperation in the learning process, the teacher must show literature to be a means of self-empowerment by developing their aesthetic appreciation (i.e., enhancement of pleasure or jouissance as Roland Barthes terms it) as well as their critical faculties (i.e. enhancement of cognitive and perceptual power) for as Chambers (1984: 222) puts it, the study of literature “shades into a study of human beings’ understanding of human beings”, a knowledge all young people seek.

A possible approach that can open up the world of “serious” writing for Japanese students unused to reading matter more demanding than comics or fashion/hobby magazines, is also suggested by Kernan's argument for teaching literature: the centrality of literature in human culture, a discipline intersecting with almost every field of human endeavor. This suggests the great flexibility of literature both as an instrument of pedagogy covering a vast range of subjects and themes, and as an object of immense pleasure (for one of the most eloquent arguments defending the place of literature in education see Louise M. Rosenblatt’s Literature as Exploration, 1995).

Eminently utilizable for pedagogy is the fact that literature interacts with “ways of thinking about important things”. To contend with the prevailing reality-deficit of a Japanese youth culture rooted in a de-politicized, escapist manga-world, and the aversion to anything intellectual (often dismissed contemptuously as “maji”, or “too serious”), or anything serious demanding an ethical response (avoided with a cry of “kurai”, or “that’s too dark”), literature can be utilized as a powerful pedagogical tool if selected discriminately in the spirit of Nietzsche's dictum: “whoever is a teacher from the very heart takes all things seriously only with reference to his students—even himself” (1990, Beyond Good and Evil, Pt.4: 63).
CHAPTER III

There can be no doubting students’ need for intellectual fare inundated as they are today by the ideological nostrums of business-dominated mass-media and publications. Referring to social critic Asada Akira’s diagnosis of the Disneylandization of Japanese culture as “infantile”, Gavan McCormack (1996: 100) in “The Emptiness of Japanese Affluence” paints a picture of intellectual malnourishment familiar to educators in Japan: It [the Disneyland phenomenon] is indeed worse, since it involves the sanitization of myth and the exclusion of the real world to eliminate violence and sexuality, to “deodorize the real, the raw, the natural” (as Mita Munesuke puts it) and to present an adult fantasy of infancy in which kawaii-rashisa, or cuteness, is predominant. The manmade spaces of such worlds represent in concentrated form the hyperreality of contemporary Japan.

Disneyland in Japan may be said to epitomize the quality of a cloyingly wholesome “harmlessness”, that characterizes Japanese popular culture, an antithetical world to that of serious literature which refracts a more abrasive image of reality. In Futon (1907) Tayama Katai describes a young girl’s education that produces students who, “ignored mankind’s base aspects while celebrating its attractive ones.”, a characterization of Japanese education’s emphasis of the “sugar side” of life that even today holds true. As social critic Nakajima Satomi (Asahi Evening News, July 6, 1997) comments: “School education is far too behind reality. Students should be given options about what they learn. The new generation does not deserve hackneyed textbooks.”

It is therefore imperative that texts should convey a more realistic picture of the world without at the same time ignoring the claims of the imagination for the development of an ethical and aesthetic sensibility, and an enrichment of the inner life. Most textbooks fail to meet the above criteria, and their dull, stereotyped view of the world, often condescending in tone, cannot hold the interest of young adults. One exception is Dyer’s “Power Play: Individuals in Conflict-Literacy Selections for Students of English” (1996) which with its more honest view of our violent world represents a breakthrough in textbook authenticity, hopefully a harbinger of future trends.

Graded readers for all their usefulness in extensive reading (see Bamford and Day; Waring, 1997), which would require an outlay of time and energy impossible to expect of non-majors, also have the great disadvantage of literary feebleness, lacking a mature content that can impress young adults; as Vincent and Carter (1986: 212) write: the “thin, stilted language” lacks “all the linguistic, emotional, and aesthetic qualities that characterize real literature”. Learning requires attention and memory processing which only materials rich in affective content can provide (Bower, 1994: 303-6).

Since motivating students to engage intellectually and emotionally with texts for the purpose of classroom discourse is the goal, materials must be capable of stimulating them to spend time preparing outside the class, otherwise the whole structure of homework-based communicative pedagogy will be threatened (McVeigh, 1997).
Unencumbered by the obligation to teach canonical texts, teachers can enjoy more flexibility of choice to utilize a vast range of texts that are more accessible to students with little experience of literature; neither need one be restricted to teaching texts from the English speaking world which, as Doyle suggests, “involves a retreat into a museum-like or ‘monumental’ role with teachers of English as professional curators of a residual ‘national cultural heritage’” (1989: 135). Instead teachers can take advantage of the wealth of translations available in English, the global language (Crystal, 1997) for as Vizinczey argues: “The teaching of English literature instead of literature is ... the most harmful of all wrong-headed educational practices, robbing our intellectual and artistic life of a great deal of wisdom and inspiration” (1988: 11).

Cultural knowledge of the world is accessible through the creative imagination of mankind; as Rabindranath Tagore wrote (Sen, 1997): “Whatever we understand and enjoy in human products instantly becomes ours, wherever they might have their origin. I am proud of my humanity when I can acknowledge the poets and artists of other countries as my own,” and commenting on the situation in India that has a resonance for the Japanese today as well as underscoring the relevance of learning English he opined: “circumstances almost compel us to learn English, and this lucky accident has given us the opportunity of access into the richest of all poetical literatures of the world” (infinitely enriched if one includes the repository of translated world literature). A multicultural approach brings the pleasures and surprises of diversity to reading, stimulating discourse through the myriad challenges to our understanding posed by the enigma of the Other and culturally-conditioned Otherness.

“Literature”, as Brumfit (1986: 233) writes, “remains probably the easiest and most economical means of providing this experience of the the possibilities of contact with other minds and cultural conditions”. Given the cultural and psychological isolation felt by Japanese (Matsumoto, 1996), especially their estrangement from Asia and ignorance of the Third World, exposure to materials that shed light on the condition of mankind or the historical processes that have produced it, is sorely needed to fill the lacunae in the students’ knowledge left by years of neglect during the severe regimen of exam preparation; this chance to rekindle the almost extinguished flame of curiosity and fan it into enthusiasm for learning should not be wasted through the use of lifeless texts that have no appeal to young minds starved of the kinds of knowledge essential for the development of a mature, cultured and informed individual. Ultimately, it is difficult to think of a more laudable aim for a humanistic education than to demonstrate Juvenal’s perennial truth that nothing human is alien to us; reading Third World literature, as Bapsi Sidhwa (1992) claims, will help to develop our conscience, a view echoing Northrop Frye (1964) who argued that literature encourages tolerance.

In order to discover this Japanese must learn by “decentering”, looking at the world from different points of view thus diffusing subjectivity and expanding identity, a process facilitated by the use of multicultural or ethnic texts (at the time of writing Native American culture is enjoying a boom) rather than by canonical or “monumental” texts which only reinforce Japanese predilections for “imagining a community” with the
hegemonic culture of the West (see Anderson, 1991), a relic of a mind-set formed during the US occupation that younger Japanese have recently begun to question.

In post-colonial literature, the marginalized, formerly “silent” people, as attested in The Empire Writes Back (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tifflin, 1989), and by Boehmer (1995) have now become of the interlocutors of the West, a role that the Japanese as co-players need to better understand in order to break down and through the cultural stereotypes exposed by Said (1979, 1993), Spivak (1990, 1993), Bhaba (1994). Writings from marginalized cultures can help Japanese students to develop a universal literacy i.e., sharing common notions or values, an ideal for a globalized twenty first century. Japanese can easily be taught to see marginalization as a key concept since their own culture may be regarded as culturally “off-center” both from an Asian and global viewpoint; the growing need for improved, economic and human ties with Asia suggests it is now time for them to re-“orient” their priorities.

Another aspect of marginalization is the disadvantaged social position of Japanese women. Since they form the majority of language students, their interests should be given priority. Post-colonial texts like the stories of Egyptian writer Nawal El Sadawi can interest female students; women’s issues are of central importance since the struggle for female emancipation in the Third World is crucial to the process of modernization (Minh-ha, 1989). Writers committed to social justice, championing women’s rights are able to strike a sympathetic cord with young Japanese women seeking knowledge and ways to assert themselves in a society that still discriminates against them.

CHAPTER IV

Since self-empowerment results from literacy, reading should prioritize an approach encouraging critical thinking and empathy (cognitive integration with the world outside the class privileging texts that can foster the student’s social conscience, psychosexual development, and aesthetic sensibility), rather than the linguistic emphasis of the yakudoku tradition (cognitive segregation from the world outside tending to privilege canonical texts whose reputations rest on their linguistic and literary subtlety, often beyond students’ understanding, or interest; (see Nespor, 1991:169-88).

The connection between literature and the world must be revealed if students are to be expected to take reading seriously (Falk, 1989). The division of literature and the political must be overcome by selecting texts that communicate to students through their “human” rather than “theoretical” character (Horton and Baumeister, 1996); accounts written in the first person, witnessing history from the point of view of the individual, e.g., Rigoberta Menchu’s autobiography, are most effective in bridging the distance between the word and the world. The mediating power of words to communicate reality and transform the life of an individual is demonstrated in Galaseno’s “The Function of the Reader/ 2 ” (1991). Rorty (1989: xvi) explains the process as follows:
Solidarity is not discovered by reflection, but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking ‘They do not feel it as we would’...This process of coming to see other human beings as ‘one of us’ rather than of ‘them’ is a matter of detailed description of what other people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory, but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel.

The novel’s formidable potential to transform consciousness is offset by its length, making it too unwieldy as a pedagogical tool in L 2 ; in L1, however, it makes an ideal homework assignment for English composition during long semester breaks when there is time for the extensive mental processing in L1 required for producing in L2.

With canonical works characterized by a “high” literary register, syntactically complex archaic or old-fashioned lexis imbedded in a sophisticated cultural context the affective elements remain inaccessible to inexperienced students; even short stories are often of a length rather forbidding to students with almost no experience of reading in such a register. Thus only literary works whose lexical and syntactical register are linguistically accessible to “non-readers”, and whose cultural context is not so obscure as to preclude the empathy of the reader, can attract the interest of students. Brevity is a “crucial pedagogical factor” (Brumfit, 1986: 189), an important “reader-friendly” factor in calming the anxieties of “book-shy” students. All the above desiderata can be readily found in non-canonical writings from the Third World. First World non-canonical writings are also abundantly available but even among short works a lexical register and cultural context accessible to Japanese students is not easy to find.

It is therefore important to use short texts written in a literary register whose lexis and syntax pose few difficulties for students yet whose contents requiring the exercise of imagination can challenge students’ cognitive, ethical and aesthetic capacities (Kramsch, 1993: 16-31) since communication depends on the content of the text being accessible for reflection and discussion either in spoken or written form. From the students’ point of view the most important quality of a text is that it be understandable with or without the teacher’s help, and must also be able to absorb their attention because of its intrinsic interest and the pleasure the reading affords.

For pedagogical purposes the short story is probably best since one can expect more cohesion (integral to the text) and coherence (a result of the interaction of text and reader) than, say, with literary pieces extracted out of context (Bransford and Johnson, 1973; Cook, 1986). The brevity of the genre (often just a single page) does not induce stress and allows students the quick satisfaction of completion; moreover they can reread several times, a valuable feature for the language learner. The genre is international and offers the clearest and most accessible window into the psychology and culture of non-English speaking peoples. Shaw (1983: vii) underlines the short story’s flexibility, its
capacity to renew itself using "apparently unsophisticated literary conventions", “its recurrent concern with an audience, thought of as an intimate group or community”, which no doubt accounts for its universal appeal. The fact that it has suffered critical neglect (Reid, 1991) has to do less with its intrinsic merits than with the economics of publishing and consumption habits influenced by our business-dominated society that, according to Zeraffa (1976: 145), fosters “the illusion that ‘reality’ and ‘literature’ are at opposite ends of the spectrum” with the result that “In relating culture to their job, workers alienate themselves-reading then loses what freedom, mentally liberating power, expansiveness, it possesses”. These conclusions were drawn from research projects in France in the late sixties but are now even more apposite to Japan’s technocratic materialistic society, thus underscoring the importance of the university’s role in the transmission of humanistic values through literature.

The power of the short story, perhaps deriving from its ancient origins in folktale and legend, can be harnessed for pedagogy since, as noted by Shaw (ibid.), its “tendency toward the instinctual rather than the intellectual”, and its cross-fertilization of poetry and reportage (pioneered by Edgar Allen Poe), present the educator with two powerful tools: the intoxicant of emotion, and the scalpel of logic and rationality.

Together they inform the main attraction of the genre: narrative, a means of constructing reality that is central to human cognitive processes, underlying cultural formations, religions, and even the sciences (Nash, 1990). Mitchell (1981: viii) noting that narrativity has been accused by Hayden White of tending to support politically conservative social conditions so that the revolt against narrativity in modern historiography and literature can be seen as a revolt against the narratives of the status quo, cites Robert Scholes’ remark that it is an “‘opiate’ which mystifies our understanding by providing a false sense of coherence, an ‘illusion of sequence’”. Its opiate-like seductive power to grab the reader’s attention (Chambers 1984) makes narrative such a valuable pedagogical tool when it is used with critical thinking (see Bruner 1997). In his model of narrative modes Bonheim (1982: 1-17) identifies four modes: 1) description, 2) report, 3) speech, 4) comment, all of which have a logical relationship with each other, and can provide ways for a communicative pedagogy to elicit active reader interaction with the texts utilizing analytical thinking and guesswork.

Modern short stories in the West often forgo traditional narrative structure in favor of the middle or “stasis”, thus inviting psychological complexity (Reid, 1991: 64), but lacking “action” they may be less attractive for students. Third World stories, while not necessarily lacking in psychological subtlety or interest (often through the actions of the protagonists), retain a more traditional plot lines that provide the ironical twists the genre is known for. Still, it is better not to indulge students in their predilection for closed “happy endings”, but to find stories that are open-ended to stimulate their imagination such as Alice Walker’s “The Flowers” that ends with “And the summer was over.” (such ambiguity demands further elucidation that can only come from the active engagement of the reader’s imagination in constructing a continuation of the narrative), or stories that can challenge their cognitive limits at the level of their unusual narrative structure or
point of view such as Bierce’s “The Incident at Owl Creek”. The latter story depicts a mysterious state of mind of a man at the border of life and death. The film Jacob’s Ladder (Adrian Lyne, 1990) brilliantly depicts the identical theme in celluloid using the same structures of “defamiliarization”, i.e., presenting the familiar in a different, unusual light, (the literary device identified by the Russian Formalists); purposely using stories and films in tandem with a similar theme or structure is a powerful pedagogical method of stimulating students to cognitive activity, training them to recognize artistic structures. Exposing students further to techniques of defamiliarization enables them to develop the perceptions and insights needed for the kind of discriminating judgement that Nietzsche recommended:

...let us not be ungrateful to such resolute reversals of accustomed perspectives and valuations...: to see differently in this way for once, to want to see differently, is no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future ‘objectivity’–the latter understood not as ‘contemplation without interest’ (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability to control one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a variety of perspectives and affectations in the service of knowledge

(Genealogy of Morals 3:12, cited in Schacht, 1995).

Short stories from the Third World with its vibrant oral traditions are so striking perhaps because the oral origins can still be heard on the printed page, facilitating identification with the protagonists. As A.E. Coppard (1951: viii) observes: “The folktale ministered to an apparently inborn and universal desire to hear tales, and it is my feeling that the closer the modern short story conforms to that ancient tradition of being spoken to you, rather than being read at you, the more acceptable it becomes.” Incidentally, it is worth noting here that the most popular narrative form with students is the personal anecdote from the teacher’s own life told in easy to understand English: spoken at a less than normal speed, clearly enunciated, eschewing slang and words Japanese students cannot be expected to know which is the only way to communicate with Japanese; recounting anecdotes is perhaps the most effective way of creating an intimate communicative atmosphere in the classroom (Wright, 1995), and the highly positive student response to storytelling, especially anecdotes from the teacher’s personal experience has been confirmed by research on the criteria considered by Japanese students to constitute a good teacher (Hadley & Hadley, 1996). Similarly, the simple diction of Third World stories provides a lexical register suitable for language learners and the preponderance of speech, a characteristic of the short story noted by Bonheim (1992: 8-10), means that students get to see and hear the spoken language, both aiding language memorization, thus enabling them more easily to quote verbatim, utilizing the text in asking questions or making comments.

Teaching literature must after all serve language acquisition as well as stimulate students’ interest in literature: both aims, as Short and Candlin (1986) point out, should be linked and mutually reinforcing. Vocabulary rather than grammar is the weak point of
Japanese students. Knowledge of lexis is restricted to the Japanese equivalent word as a result of yakudoku training rather than word usage and cultural nuance that can only be acquired by using the language communicatively. Hence the importance of reading for systematic vocabulary building (Nation, 1990), especially texts written in contemporary spoken English to counteract the oddly dated lexis students acquire from Japanese school textbooks. Rather than teaching “Literature” which is closely bound to the institutional regulation of culture (Bennet, 1990), a sounder pedagogical approach is to use texts that exhibit literariness, and as Vincent (1986: 215) argues, they could “include well-written works of non-fiction: history, biography, philosophy, politics”, leading to “more difficult text incorporating the communicative features of non-fiction writing: exposition, narration, description, argument”. As an example the oral reports of Studs Terkel on US society (used with their Japanese versions), by combining the spoken and written word, also make effective texts for communicative teaching.

Although many teachers use magazines such as Time or Newsweek, the latter publications are highly unsuitable materials: not only is the language far too difficult, its idiosyncratic style featuring puns, wordplay, and allusions to US culture that make reading a chore or puzzle, but their tendentiousness makes them an unprofitable read, merely informing us about the opinions of a certain class of Americans rather than about the true state of the world. Newspapers, too, are far from objective, the omission or distortion of the historical record for political reasons being particularly egregious (Maclean, 1981). Using tendentious materials to teach “neutral” language is a mistaken approach taken by many teachers with little knowledge of politics or history which inevitably leads to a subtle form of indoctrination (Casey, 1992).

Instead, texts that communicate through revelation are needed, as Eduardo Gal- eano urges: “I think that a primordial function of Latin American literature today is the rescue of the word, frequently used and abused with impunity for the purposes of hampering and betraying communication” (1988: 124). Non-fiction can be interesting for students if it reveals facts that are hidden, suppressed or played down by the media such as the holocaust on East Timor, and especially when used in conjunction with literature and film (in the latter case the pedagogical value of the anecdote was proved when a living witness to man’s inhumanity to man elicited a strong student response). Texts that are autobiographical, written in the first person (ie., oral history, showing the human face of tragedy and courage), such as the story of Rigoberta Menchu, a witness to the slaughter and persecution of Maya Indians can similarly produce a powerful effect on students. Such non-fiction texts with a powerful affective content require extensive background knowledge which, passed on to students, can deepen their interest in history, society and politics. The disadvantages of non-fiction are, however, the difficulty of finding a linguistic level appropriate for learners and the flatness of the prose compared to that of a literary register (characterized by ambiguity).

Nell (1988: 260) finds: “Correct matching of book and reader is the foundation upon which ludic reading rests,” and so the key to success in using literature in the language class, as McKay (1986: 191-3) writes, must depend on an appropriate selection that avoids
texts which are difficult linguistically or on a cultural level since they can be of little benefit for students who need to find some pleasure in the reading act in order to be motivated to read. She argues that if Widdowson (1979: 74) and others are right to regard reading as “interaction between writer and reader mediated through the text”, then “the perspective of reading as interaction presupposes...that a reader is willing to interact with a particular text. It is here that the motivational factors involved in reading become critical”, and makes the following remarks that offer clues for the selection of materials and some possible pedagogical approaches to reading:

What is critical in selecting a text is to examine it for both its linguistic and its conceptual difficulties. Whereas readability formulas provide some index of the former, unfortunately we have little to aid us in dealing with the latter”, adding, “literature may provide the affective attitudinal, and experiential factors that will motivate [students] to read”, and concluding, “literary texts can aid in the development of reading proficiency and in this way contribute to a student’s academic and occupational objectives.

Considering the relationship of language teaching to literature again McKay makes a useful distinction between the traditional use of literature for teaching language usage and its rare use for developing language usage (191):

Yet the advantage of using literature for this purpose is that literature presents language in discourse in which the parameters of the setting and role relationship are defined. Language that illustrates a particular register or dialect is embedded within a social context, and thus there is a basis for determining why a particular form is used. As such, literature is ideal for developing an awareness of language.

McKay’s argument would appear to recommend and justify the use of short stories outside the “Great Tradition” whose simple diction and a strong narrative make them accessible to linguistic decoding and conceptual engagement by students with little experience of stylistics or exegesis. It should be stressed here that short stories from the canon often have the fatal disadvantage of a diction that is no longer modern and therefore can not serve as a model of contemporary language that students can emulate.

Since curiosity and pleasure motivate people to read they must be major criteria of selection: an entertaining “good read” that possesses such qualities as fast-paced narrative or suspense, intriguing characters, mystery, sexuality, and even violence, cruelty, horror - kowaimono mitasa (scary things attract) as the Japanese say. As Goethe put it in his conversations with Eckermann, the novella should be the telling of an unheard of event that has actually happened. Even without strict adherence to Goethe’s formulation it is desirable that an invented story should, within its fictional framework, narrate events that at least could happen, and it should preserve psychological plausibility in the actions and words of the protagonists for as F.R. Leavis insisted reading literature is not about “literary values” but is about making judgements about life. Thus the ethical dimension without which the concept of education is meaningless should be the sine qua non of a reading curriculum.

This does not mean an anodyne story with a moral or a happy ending but rather
the contrary: a shockingly cruel story or a tragic end that shows the frailty and fallibility of humans, the vicissitudes of life, and the amoral and often ironic forces of Fate, despite which the protagonists, caught in a dilemma, must make ethical decisions that reveal the positive side of humanity, virtues like love, courage, fortitude, self-sacrifice. The depiction of human behavior under extreme conditions or circumstances, by revealing aspects of the best and worst in us that remain hidden in the mundane business of everyday living, can instruct us on the essence of our humanity. Students affectively caught up in the narrative can then reflect on the issues at stake and make their own individual identifications and evaluations. Fiction must have the power to disturb and shock, to compel the reader to reflect when finding connections between self and story; anything less will be unable to make full use of literature’s didactic potential. Thus open-ended narratives should be privileged over closed-endings since they offer superior opportunities for cognitive development through reflection and discussion. To maximize the cumulative impact of texts it is clearly preferable to group them by theme, formal construction rather than a haphazard selection devoid of any thematic link.

The essential point of using literature in language classes is therefore to provide content insightful and rich in psychological, social and ethical implications that will give students an object to interact with so that through dialogue, communicating first with the Self and then with other members of the class and with the teacher (a dialogic approach to learning) they will be better able to expand their awareness of the literary work, its connection with the world at large, and most importantly experience the dialectic of self-empowerment that can come from a serious engagement with imaginative writing (Brooker and Humm, 1989; Holquist, 1990).

CHAPTER V

Reading pedagogy should not deny the ontological reality of a text as communication, ie. possessing, authorial intention (identifiable or not), cohesive meaning, however “unstable”, “polyphonic” and open to interpretation. The reader must try to establish communication with the teller; this means closely studying the text to determine possible meanings. Although readers utilize their own knowledge and experience when reading, the text is able to block semantic drift by limiting the reader’s freedom of interpretation so that a hierarchy of meaning can be ultimately identified, made possible, as Chambers (1984: 207) shows, by “the self-contextualizing power of literary discourse” or narrative’s “situational self-reflexivity”. Thus the teacher’s role is to act as an arbiter to keep semantic drift within the bounds of plausibility.

We have now arrived at the point where it becomes necessary to illustrate how the readers’ dialog with the text, the teacher and other students forming a triangular relationship with the text as object, can produce communication in the language class. Postulating a short story of one to five pages (the ideal length) chosen for its readability, ie. brevity, contemporary language, short sentences, relatively uncomplicated grammar
and syntax, high-frequency items of vocabulary, its oral discoursiveness, its narrative interest or psychological portraits, and finally and most importantly, for its affective intensity deriving from powerful subject matter, the author’s depth of insight and the power of the writing (symbolism, metaphor, irony, “realism” etc.), the teacher creates a pedagogic mise-en-scene presenting the students with a short text of discourse in a literary register that is well within their ability to grasp linguistically, ie. the surface meaning, but which requires the application of thought or “reading between the lines” in order to establish a deeper, more satisfying communication (semantically, aesthetically and ethically) with the text.

The brevity and linguistic simplicity of the piece are psychologically reassuring to the student while a powerful subject matter or intriguing narrative act as motivators generating interest, surprise, pleasure or even horror and revulsion; the particular emotion is not important as long as the student feels a powerful reaction to the piece since it is the affective reaction that stimulates memory, reflection and learning. As will be shown in detail in the next section on film the emotions play an important role in the learning process, and since the peculiar role of art is to disturb as well as to gratify, its pedagogical role should be fully utilized just as Hamlet understood when he staged a play to observe the emotional reactions of the usurpers and discover truth.

Matsumoto (1996) reveals culture-based differences in the expression of emotion between Japanese and others, but he emphasises the former’s capacity for emotion, the key behavioral element being avoidance of confrontation. Thus Japanese avoidance behavior can be exploited for pedagogical purposes by presenting highly emotional materials that challenge culturally-imposed barriers to self-expression; as Raja Rao (1992: 150) observes: “There is no cultural context to love, life and death”.

The other key point is that the apparently “simple” text should contain a number of items “hidden” from the comprehension of the students on account of linguistic subtleties, symbolic imagery, narrative structure, cultural background knowledge etc. By such means authors are able to carry out their communicative story-telling intentions which can best be inferenced by close reading, intentionalism being most serviceable as a heuristic tool for analysis and pedagogy (Livingston, 1996).

It is this communicative aspect of the text that is the most difficult for students to grasp since it involves top-down processing. The stark contrast between the text’s simplicity of diction and the depth of meaning creating tension, frustration, dissatisfaction, forces the reader to go over the piece again and again stimulating students to top-down reading; during the post-reading stage in class students can learn through their affective responses of surprise, shock, anger, indignation, disgust, delight and pleasure in discovery as well as shame at not seeing and finding the obvious in front of their faces in the text. This “reductive” formula of “simple diction” with “deep meaning” heightens the contrast with the “hidden” meaning that lurks “between the lines” to surprise or shock in the post-reading stage that occurs in the classroom after students have done their initial readings at home. The contrast of “before” and “after” may be an effective pedagogical procedure highlighting the differences in individual interpretation achieved outside of
class and the consensual interpretation(s) arrived at in the class post-reading session. It is
interesting to note that the many narratives involving protagonists confronting a
dilemma often resulting from their not being privy to certain information where the
reader is placed in the parallel position of having to solve the same dilemma by working
through the obstacles to comprehension make ideal texts for study since reader identifi-
cation with the hero can be effectively exploited for pedagogic purposes (e.g., Saadat
Hasan Manto’s “The Return”, “The Woman in the Red Raincoat”; Alice Walker’s “The
Flowers”; Paul Bowles’ “The Hyena”).

The texts are assigned as homework for the students to read and prepare: making
vocabulary lists and notes on lexical items useful for personal use in conversation or
composition, notes on words, phrases, sentences not properly understood, questions
about meaning in the text, comments identifying themes, speculations on authorial
intentions and overall meaning of the text, and finally personal comments on how they
find the piece. Apart from making notes on questions for discussion in class students are
asked to pay special attention to anything new, unusual, unknown or surprising they can
discover from their engagement with the text.

Since students will have few problems with the linguistic items in the text the
teacher only needs to explain an odd lexical item that might not be easily found in a
dictionary, i.e. foreign words such as the Egyptian “fellah”; some explanation of the
cultural background of the text may also be necessary: for example in “The Return” and
“The Woman in the Red Raincoat” it would be relevant to know about the slaughter of a
million Hindus and Moslems that accompanied the Partition of India and Pakistan for
Manto’s point is that individual human behavior and morality can become hostage to
mob psychology under extraordinary circumstances unleashed by environmental and
historical forces.

However, care must be taken not to give away information that the students can
be expected to find themselves through inference and guesswork. Japanese students rely
too much on information doled out by the teacher which relieves them of the obligation
to think for themselves. Instead, they must learn the importance of intelligent guesswork,
based on inference or association, as essential techniques in a reader’s repertoire while
avoiding wild speculations unsupported by the text, perhaps the most common error that
students commit through top-down processing, attempting to construct meaning from
their reading.

As a demonstration of how to develop such techniques some practice problems can
be worked on in class during the pre-reading stage, but the teacher must restrict the
amount of information about the text to prevent blind adherence of the students to the
teacher’s word since the object is to give them the freedom and responsibility to read and
investigate for themselves. Hints may be given for difficult symbolic items, titles, key
words, and pattern recognition: recurring motifs or contrasting narrative devices. The
teacher might even speculate about possible themes but in this area, especially, care must
be taken not to give too much away regarding interpretations which should be left to the
post-reading stage in class.
The pedagogical implication of simple diction is that students are better able to process directly through L2 without first resorting to mental translation, thus aiding language acquisition. Cohen and Hawras (1996) report certain advantages of the latter, but it is my contention that the pedagogic formula of “simple diction-deep meaning” first allows a superficial linguistic processing in L2 avoiding the disadvantages of L1 processing e.g., miscomprehension, micro-level (word-by-word) translation, the slow, bottom-up approach characteristic of yakudoku; the latter entails, as Cohen and Hawras point out (8), “the risk of attending to second-language forms only briefly, with the bulk of meaning processing reserved for the first-language mental representation”, and “learners focus primarily on transformed first-language representations rather than on the original second-language forms, diminishing possibilities of second-language acquisition.” At a later stage when students are clarifying the finer points of grammar or syntax, or attempting to read between the lines to comprehend a deeper level of the text, to work out psychological issues in the minds of the protagonists, to identify authorial intention or the overall meaning of the text, the advantages of mental translation in L1 claimed by Kern (1994) will prevail. To aid and encourage L2 processing a learner’s English-English dictionary is indispensable; the possession of one is a condition of entry into my elective classes, and instruction in their use is the first order of the day. English-Japanese dictionaries are often inaccurate and a source of much error and confusion, especially when used carelessly, as is the case with the majority of students (Crane, A., Daily Yomiuri, May 14, 1992).

At the linguistic level, the simple grammar, syntax and lexis remove psychological pressure from the students, giving them an affective boost by making superficial comprehension immediately accessible through L2, avoiding the temptations of the yakudoku approach. The most urgent task of semantic processing remains mainly that of identifying the cohesion of the text.

The poor reading habits of Japanese students schooled in yakudoku methods of bottom-up processing, translating laboriously word for word, oblivious to the nonsense they often produce, must be strongly countered by an interactive approach to reading: teaching students “chunking” techniques to enable them to comprehend larger units than the word or sentence, developing skills in schema production, top-down processing that is responsible for much of the so-called short-circuiting of second language reading (Carrell, Devine and Eskey, 1988; Simpson, 1997).

Since pronouns establish anaphoric and cataphoric connections, the humble pronoun, conspicuously absent in Japanese, is for students the most serious obstacle to establishing text cohesion. A text rich in pronouns is therefore highly desirable for training students to master the use of this essential semantic marker. In contrast to the dry format of the traditional grammar class such points of grammar can often be taught indirectly within the framework of the narrative, employing low-order questions in a “Socratic” approach that helps students to think for themselves by avoiding the spoon-feeding methods they are used to; Eduardo Galeano’s “Chronicle of the City of Quito” for example begins: “He marches at the head of left-wing demonstrations.”, and ends: “Ever
since, he has loathed hats, uniforms, and motorcycles.” Without careful attention one can easily miss the point that “he” is actually a dog; students must be gently guided to discover for themselves this simple but crucial fact on which the whole story turns.

The cataphoric use of the adjective as in Alice Walker’s “The Flowers” : “It was then she stepped right into his eyes.”, can also cause reader disorientation. Similarly, appositional nouns or phrases baffle: “it was the rotted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil”, students failing to grasp the function of the comma as well as the anaphoric reference of “another piece” in the following sentence: “Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece”, confused by the inverted word order and the past tense form of “cling” (ibid.). In both examples mental processing in L₁ and L₂ both failed to establish coherence.

This failure suggests visualization as a means of facilitating comprehension. Hence post-reading can be conducted using TOL (Thinking out loud) methods (Steen, 1994) and visualization techniques (for a theoretical discussion see Esrock, 1994) such as treating texts as scenarios from which a “film scene” can be made with the teacher as “director” soliciting ideas and suggestions from students with low-order questions in L₂ for “bottom-up” processing and allowing students to answer difficult questions (“top-down” processing) in L₁ which can then be rendered into a simplified form of L₂ (note that an ability to speak and read Japanese is essential to be able to handle sophisticated materials and students’ written work in L₁).

The post-reading sessions give students the opportunity to clarify extant questions about the text. If written work has been done, it should also be discussed. Students must be encouraged to consider themselves in the role of teacher whenever they make an utterance. The teacher acts as coordinator reviewing the text with students which provides opportunities for discourse.

Teaching vocabulary development and word recognition based on conceptual knowledge associated with a given word (recognizing that words do not have fixed meanings) enables students to concretize the text using chunking and visualization techniques indispensable for developing bottom-up decoding skills (Carrell, Devine, and Eskey, 1988), whereas for top-down reading, problem solving, identifying and hierarchizing key words and concepts, recognizing patterns, and employing associational argumentation, is especially effective when handling symbols, ideation, metaphor, and abstract concepts (Steen, 1994), thus privileging cognitive skill development.

An example of the latter may be found in the previously quoted sentence from Alice Walker where the word “benignly” carries an ironic charge symbolizing the historical process of crimes (the noose) gradually being forgotten with the passage of time (blending...into the soil); the symbolic force of this seemingly innocuous phrase can open the whole can of worms of slavery and oppression if its meaning at the symbolic level is unearthed. The last sentence, “And the summer was over”, is fraught with semantic weight bearing the message of the story, only fully retrievable by readers whose imagination can carry them forward to a closure outside of the text.

Communication centered around symbolic language is thus a useful way of getting
students to speak since through associational exercises they are also forced to think. Similarly, post-reading sessions can work to produce a form of “satori” in the students with a powerful affective charge if expectations are overturned in top-down processing as in the denouement of “The Return” when the missing daughter turns up at last, semi-conscious but alive, to the joy of her father, who with eyes upturned in praise to Allah, does not notice the gruesome evidence of gang-rape. Like the father, students, too, believe it is a happy end. Readers from the Pakistani Moslem community know otherwise: the disgraced honor of the family means a death sentence, most likely carried out, ironically, at the hands of her own father. Such stories remain in the mind for a long time as does the lesson that there is more to literature (and life) than meets the eye.

Finally, to answer objections to the concept of radical content for education as proposed in this paper I shall leave the last word to Georges Bataille who believed that literature has value for humans in that it expresses “an acute form of Evil” which demands a “hypermorality” from the reader. In his introduction (1990) he states: “Literature is communication. Communication requires loyalty. A rigorous morality results from complicity in the knowledge of Evil, which is the basis of intense communication.”

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