Exploring Poetry and Identity in a Language Learning Environment

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Abstract

This study utilizes Allwright and Hanks' (2009) guidelines on the importance of seeing language learners as *key developing practitioners* and the identity of the learner placed centrally in the learning process. With this as a starting point for conducting an exploratory study, this paper discusses opinions about poetry in an L2 setting. At first, the author describes the development of an introductory class survey conducted with students in an EISO (content-based) poetry course taken by third and fourth year students at KUIS. Results of the survey showed that students seek engagement with poetry as a tool for personal and linguistic development, although mostly they rely on narrow pre-tertiary knowledge of poetry to do so. Evidence for development of personalization and individual engagement as well as identification with the texts is discussed, and in light of these findings recommendations for further research are proposed.

Introduction

Teaching poetry to learners of English offers the teacher the chance to encourage readers to "connect the poems to their lives" (Showalter, 2003). Ideally, this can fit in well with the learners' own goals for learning (Eagleton, 2006), and can bring in creativity to the language classroom (Maley, 2003). Over the years there have been numerous attempts to weave poetry through a language classroom curriculum with varying levels of success (Carter & Long, 1991, Collie & Slater, 2010). Many researchers have commented on the general trend over the past 40

years to reduce the amount of time spent on literature and learning through literary texts (see Duff & Maley, 2007; Hall, 2005; Lazar, 1993; Spiro, 2004; Tomlinson, 1998). In recent discussions of literature in the language teaching classroom these trend may be turning again and literary texts may be used more widely than before, although it remains a niche (see Bibby & McIlroy, 2013 and McIlroy, 2013 for a discussion of this). In ELT in general and in the EFL context in Japan in particular, literary texts are absent from curricula at various levels. The influence of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and conversational English as well as teaching to tests such as TOEIC are often cited as reasons. Teachers may not always have the freedom to choose their classroom texts. Teachers can also be limited by other factors such as student proficiency level, course goals, or management policy. Despite the clear and convincing arguments in favor of using poetry in the language classroom, in some contexts, poetry and literary works are conspicuous by their absence.

In Hanks and Allwright (2009) Table 1 shows language learning principles which are asserted as propositions. These seem simple but are difficult to realize in many teaching contexts. Reasons for their lack of application may depend on the institution, but is generally considered to be caused by lack of alignment between the goals of the learners and the goals of the teachers and administrators. For the purpose of this study, the main concern is the notion of learner centrality and in particular the principles 1 and 5 are given priority.

Table 1: The developing language learner and language learning principles

1	Learners are unique individuals who learn and develop best in their own idiosyncratic ways.
2	Learners are social beings who learn and develop best in a mutually supportive environment.
3	Learners are capable of taking learning seriously.
4	Learners are capable of independent decision-making.
5	Learners are capable of developing as practitioners of learning.

Allwright & Hanks, 2009. p.7

Participants

Thirteen students (4 male, 9 female) in their third and fourth year at KUIS participated in the baseline questionnaire on the first day of the poetry themed EISO class created by the author. Students at the university complete a four year degree programme in one of the following three departments: English, International Communication and International Languages and Culture. Some students are studying another foreign language as well as English. All of the students in this study were native speakers of Japanese, and one of the thirteen was also a Spanish and Tagalog speaker. The students gave permission for their comments to be included in this research report, and the researcher took note of those who requested anonymous reporting of their comments.

Context

The context of pre-tertiary study education in Japan merits some mention here. All students in this study had completed their schooling in Japan, although one student was born overseas and moved to Japan after receiving the first years of his schooling in the Philippines. The others were all participants in and recipients of a

typical Japanese school experience in the sense that they attended schools in Japan for their full pre-tertiary experience. This is important when considering the shared experience of the students regarding poetry teaching in school. In the Japanese school system poetry is taught in Japanese classes using government-approved textbooks. The content of these textbooks is standardized across the country and content is also uniformly controlled by the government, resulting in the endurance of a literary canon, or tradition of reading certain texts. One result of this is that in subjects such as kanji that the vocabulary is encountered by all third-graders at the same time and in mathematics, all students cover the same content more or less simultaneously. While some might criticize this "one size fits all" approach, it is largely accepted and continues through precedent. One consequence of this approach is that students have a shared understanding of readings from the textbook, and in terms of literature, there are texts from the Japanese canon of Literature (The Tale of Genji by Murasaki Shikibu being one example) that all students have studied. In this sense a shared cultural memory of literary works is a product of the school system. This is to some degree similar to the situation in the UK where some Shakespeare is compulsory, although this differs in the sense that a particular play might be chosen by the teacher and so varies from school to school. In Japan, variation through teacher choice is not permitted and therefore doesn't exist. Effectively, when two students talk about a particular poet from elementary school, they are talking about the same poem by the same poet.

Procedures

The baseline survey (appendix A) was created to find out students' entry-level

engagement with poetry, and to find out about their classroom needs. Written reflections were collected as part of the course content, and are reported on briefly here also.

The data collected and reported on here was seen as useful for learning about students at the beginning of the course. The purpose of collecting this information was to help build a profile of students`ideas and beliefs about poetry the beginning of the course. Additionally, the information gathered was useful for the creation of classroom activities and for understanding what types of activities in the course that the students would enjoy. The most informative questions appeared to be those which invited open responses from students linked with the topic of poetry.

Since the research was exploratory in nature, a non-probability, purposive sampling selection method was used (Dornyei, 2003) in choosing items to report. Although this method reduces the suitability of the research procedure for replicability given the small number of student participants, this is one limitation to mention but is accepted in this case. The researcher considers the goal of exploratory practice justifies the method.

Baseline questionnaire: Results and interpretation
In creating this baseline survey the intention was to find out details relating to a poetry learning history or background in poetry from the intake of students at the beginning of a semester. Individual questions and results are discussed in this section. The questions were available in English and Japanese for students, thus removing difficulty in answering them. The researcher could identify individual

students by name in the results. The interpretations and implications are the researchers own. Due to limitations of space, only selected answers will be discussed here.

Question 1: What is the first famous poet`s name you can think of? (Japanese or not) How did you learn about him/her?

The results are as follows: Kaneko Misuzu (5) Aida Mitsuo (5) Shuntaro Tanikawa (2) Pablo Neruda (1). In these results a direction connection the pre-tertiary teaching of poetry can be made since students are linking poetry to the names of poems they have certainly encountered in their school settings. It is relatively easy to find out which poems are encountered by Japanese schoolchildren since the education ministry approves country-wide content including poetry and thus all students who attended public schools will have read and studied the same poems. Most learning about poetry prior to taking the class comes from textbooks, and occasionally from popular media (TV ads.). Kaneko Misuzu's poems are used in state elementary school textbooks and Shuntaro Tanikawa is in the JHS textbook. Students reported on this connection in their comments also.

The popularity of the poet and artist Aida Mitsuo represents a different type of choice, however. His work is considered to be highly accessible for the average reader, and his poems are popular in public places such as restrooms and libraries. He also features in the high school textbook. Finally, the choice of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda came from the one student who could speak Spanish/Tagalog and who did not complete all of his schooling in Japan. These results cannot be

generalized to the wider population, but they do serve to illustrate some diversity in the multilingual backgrounds of students at KUIS.

Question 2: Can you think of a poem or a line from a poem that you know? (from any poet) Why do you like it?

"みんなが違って、みんながいい。Everyone is different and each of them is good（Misuzu）, and にんげんだもの."

The first choice is a quote from Kaneko Misuzu and has been a popularized quote in different contexts. For example, this quote is used in NHK's children's TV to help promote issues such as accepting diversity, and has even been applied to discussions of how to reduce bullying in Japan. It is a phrase which has become popularized and is interpreted in a metaphorical sense.

にんげんだもの（I'm only human）from a poem by Aida Mitsuo is also widely quoted in popular culture. Students appeared to have these quotes very clearly in their minds even at the beginning of the course and were able to mention the idea of metaphor and poetic meaning in relation to these comments. One exception here was again provided by the student who chose Pablo Neruda as his favorite author. His quote "She sits in beauty like the night Of cloudless climes and starry skies" was from memory and stands out for its detail. It is also the only quote to come from outside compulsory teaching materials, since his appreciation of Neruda did not come from his childhood educational experiences, and was instead his conscious choice to remember those lines. All of these comments provided something about

the learner, and helped show their identities in different ways. This is important information at the beginning of a course of study particularly, since it shows evidence of students' L1 poetic proficiency or their ability to understand and engage with poetry using prior learning.

Question 3: Have you ever taken a creative writing class before? Yes/No what were your impressions?

None of the students answered yes to this question. An argument for greater balance in the writing curriculum could be built from the suggestion that there is a place for creative writing in any university writing programme. It would be difficult to ascertain a singular understanding the idea of a creative writing course, however, given that no students have experienced one. Subsequently, in asking other students the same question in later semesters, not one positive response has been given for this question. That is not surprising, given the aforementioned use of pre-determined, textbook driven content in the pre-tertiary system.

Question 4: What kind of writing have you done in your spare time before? Diary? Journal? Fiction? Poetry? Anything else…..

Students could write more than one answer in this question. Diaries or Journals were the most popular with eight responses. Haiku and blogs received two each and lyrics one response. Although some writing for pleasure was reported, this did not have stated link to learning English or classes taken previously. The diaries were completed in primary school, and journals written only briefly. Given the

small number of students it is difficult to generalize about this amongst the wider population. The two answers related to blogging were from students who had learned to blog in their classes at KUIS. Overall from this question only a small amount of personal writing had been done by students, and if done at all it was around the time of elementary education.

Poetry is……

In the initial questionnaire, students' comments reported answers with some clear themes in response to the prompt "Poetry is…"(see Appendix B for the full answers by each student). A selection of responses is discussed here. Using the vocabulary analysis software Voyant, the frequency and usage of particular words can be compared.

Table 2: Screenshot of Voyant analysing Appendix B showing analysis of the word understand

First the most frequently cited comment was the idea that understanding poetry was difficult. As can be seen in Table 2, examples such as "Poetry is too difficult to understand *the meaning*" (my italics) could be seen as a common opinion. Notice that a desire to find one, clear, meaning (my interpretation) is something that students find difficult with poetry. A poetry teacher and a poetry course might therefore attempt to teach multiple meaning. Second, students attempted to bring prior learning into their definitions of poetry using expressions such as "We have to imagine the scene, because poetry is written by metaphor and simile." This was interpreted as being encouraging for the beginning of the class. Third, students appeared to be connecting poetry to their lives (Showalter's aim) "I think that to learn poetry is good to study English" and finally they were interested in individualizing the experience of reading and writing poetry "When I get the meanings of the poetry, I am moved. I met many poems because there are poems in our daily life." Overall, these brief responses invite further investigation in that they offer a beginning insight into the mind of the learner when approaching poetry.

This brief activity provides a snapshot of the students` beliefs at the point of beginning the course. Some students went further than others in trying to explain their understanding of poetry at this stage. Considering the following answer:

"Poetry is a way of expressing our inner thoughts with passion and a sophisticated vocabulary. Or, defining the world in our own way. To me, poetry is confessing your own feelings without a serious look in your face."

Student H.

This student seems to have engaged with the notion that poetry opens up an understanding of the world for the reader, shown by use of the personal pronoun `our`. This positioning additionally suggests that the student already considers himself a poet, and indeed he already reported that he writes poems in his free time. There is personalization and individualization in this definition while it manages also to keep a light-hearted approach to poetry. Incidentally, this same student joined the class with an existing enthusiasm for poetry, as seen in the table above through his Pablo Neruda quote.

Overall, the information gathered in this initial stage of the course gave a view of student interest in the topic. The important points are that poetry appears to be perceived as challenging or difficult and that there is some L1 educational capital available to be utilized in reading poetry in the L2 setting. Some positive connotations associated with poetry are evident in the curiosity shown by initial baseline data, and poetry appears to be accepted as a tool for language learning and personal development.

Discussion

This study reports on only a small number of students and a small student survey in one narrow educational context. The interpretations here are not meant to be applied elsewhere nor can they be taken further than these beginning points. Issues of learner development, identity and directions for language learning can only be discussed in a limited way in relation to these results. Nevertheless, these results show that placing the learner firmly at the center of the classroom and by conducting research in classroom settings is in the "spirit of mutual development"

(Allwright & Hanks, p.151) and therefore benefits all involved in the language learning process.

Conclusions and future directions

Further research is required to find out how and in what ways literature is being used, and can be utilized further in the language classroom at different levels and in different contexts. Literary texts which are by their nature non-factual, multi-perspective and ambiguous can be interpreted in different ways by different students. Bringing together texts which serve to assist language development alongside learner development can be mutually beneficial to students and teachers, while meeting their learners' learning goals also.

Additional note:

Another report on this project has been published paper from the Journal of Literature in Language Teaching (McIlroy, 2013 in references) focusing on teachers and poetry. The data reported on here is original to this paper.

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What do you already think about poetry….

1. What is the first **famous poet's** name you can think of? (Japanese or not). How did you learn about him/her?

2. Can you think of a poem or a line from a poem that you know? (from any poet). Why do you like it?

3. Have you ever taken a creative writing class before? Yes/No. what were your impressions?

4. What kind of writing have you done in your spare time before? Diary? Journal? Fiction? Poetry? Anything else…..

Write what you think poetry is. A definition or description is OK.

POETRY IS

…..._____

Appendix B: Poetry is…..

A. Poetry is difficult to understand for me. However, I think that to learn poetry is good to study English. Poetry has a lot of words I don't know so I should remember those words.
B. Poetry is too difficult to understand the meaning. Actually I don't have any knowledge of poetry so I''d like to get knowledge of poetry and I wanna enjoy reading or writing poetry. Since now I'd like to read some famous poetry which were written by foreigners because I think I can learn something through it. Example, history and culture.

C. Poetry is difficult to understand, due to abstract words. I am not good at getting such words, but it is exciting me. When I get the meanings of the poetry, I am moved. I met many poems because there are poems in our daily life. For example, TV commercial, textbook, advertisement and so on. So we cannot cut our daily life poems I think.

D. Poetry is peculiar written form, and it has a lot of similar sounds, voices words and phrases. We have to imagine the scene, because poetry is written by metaphor and simile. And, we can read poetry with good tempo or rhythm. But sometimes we do not understand easily because it has a lot of metaphor and simile.

E. Poetry is an alternative advocate for me to insist something instead of myself in the real world. probably, each person has special problems, but people cannot say them to the public. So, people try to express their feelings through something. That is POETRY. People change their emotions or incidents into letters as a poetry.

F. Poetry is a way to express our feeling. Sometimes it is a sad poem and sometimes it is a happy poem. Also we sympathize with those poems. Poem is a traditional culture and many people enjoy reading and writing it.

G. Poetry is sometimes difficult to understand its meaning or enter into another's message. Poetry usually uses abstract words and similes to expand its visionary world but at the same time, it does not clarify what the author wants to tell. Construction is not one and it refers to readers. [maybe she means that there are different types of poem and the reader decides how to interpret them]

H. Poetry is a way of expressing our inner thoughts with passion and a sophisticated vocabulary. Or, defining the world in our own way. To me, poetry is confessing your own feelings without a serious look in your face.

I. Poetry is one of the expressions which people think deeply and truly. Sometimes it is hard to say directly what we think. This is why we can create poem and lyrics instead of saying something. The song is a good example. Almost all singers express themselves through their music.

J. Poetry is a beautiful way of telling for someone. Because poetry and poems have many nice expressions or words. I like metaphor and simile. They give me a good image and take me in the poem. And POETRY can create own story easily. I think if we try to write some story it is long but poem is short and we can use many interesting words. So I like it.

K. Poetry is a kind of art and it is loved by all over the world. it has very deep meaning so readers can't understand when they read it at first. We should read it many times and find out the true meaning and writer's feeling. The poetry has writer's feeling, opinion, insistence, and so on. Writers express them in the poetry so I think its an art.

L. Poetry is difficult to read for me. But we can understand poems when we read it many times. Any many poems influence on many people's mind. They think in their life deeply. Poems helps and encourages them.

M. What could change some sorts of people's minds or lives, because of its power of influences, but today most people don't really care about that, even if it represents universality that hasn't changed from long time ago but we don't notice it, if we do it could be more interesting.