

Critical Thought and Literature in the Japanese University EFL Classroom

Benjamin Laskar

Abstract

Japan's socio-cultural traditions in tandem with its current academic system often contribute to the creation of students with an underdeveloped sense of individual identity that tend to possess limited critical thinking skills by the time they reach the university level. The situation is a growing concern as the need for these skills is becoming increasingly in demand both at universities and by future employers. While many modifications that allow for individual expression and critical thinking could benefit the current educational system, this paper focuses on the highly effective method of imparting said knowledge through the tutelage of literature within the university EFL classroom.

While Japan has long placed an importance on education, modern demands are making it apparent that certain skills amongst students are not being sufficiently engendered by the existing school system. Brian J. Mc Veigh, in his book, *Japanese Higher Education as Myth*, reveals a growing problem facing the country by relating that Japanese students “are not well trained in writing critically, arguing coherently, or expressing their views with conviction or verve....they have trouble with specific forms of knowledge manipulation and

production that some people, with different schooling experiences, might take for granted” (13). Largely due to Japan’s socio-cultural traditions, in tandem with the current academic system, students often possess an underdeveloped sense of individual identity and inadequate critical thinking skills by the time they reach the university level. The situation is a growing concern as the need for these skills is increasingly in demand both at universities and by future employers. While many modifications that allow for individual expression and critical thinking could benefit the current educational system, one highly effective method of imparting these skills is through the university EFL classroom and the tutelage of literature.

One requirement of critical thinking is to possess a logical, systematic mind-set, but Takeo Doi in his seminal work regarding the psychology of the Japanese, *The Anatomy of Dependence*, notes of Japanese thought that “compared with thought in the West, it is not logical but intuitive” (76). Reasoning often results in separation from the group, potential disagreement with authority, and disharmony—all qualities generally disapproved of in Japanese society. During communication meaning is often and expected to be inferred, with people striving “to deny the fact of separation and generate, mainly by emotional means, a sense of identity with [their] surroundings” (76).¹

An environment that privileges independent thought and personal opinion is another requirement for critical thinking but the current Japanese educational

¹ This attitude permeates almost every aspect of Japanese life and is apparent even in the Arts. Donald Keene observes: “...suggestion, if not a uniquely Japanese phenomenon, is certainly unlike the common European forms of literary expression...[where] ambiguity was not highly esteemed...”(14) This idea is echoed by Makoto Ueda who relates that in Japan there is “... conspicuous silence on the function of discursive reason in the process of artistic expression. Of course the materials of art tend to be emotions rather than ideas, but the Japanese seem to be almost excessively emphatic on this truism.... Japanese aestheticians minimize the role of intellect in artistic creation. They are all intuitionists.” (218)

system often encourages group acquiescence and conformity. Interactions amongst students and instructors adhere to a hierarchical structure in which knowledge is passed down and rarely challenged. Even if a student were to raise questions in these teacher-centered classrooms they run the risk of garnering peer disapproval as the student is asserting their individuality over the group. Many are familiar with the classic Japanese aphorism “the nail that sticks up will be hammered down” to illustrate the cultural importance of these ideas within society. Doi goes on to mention that the Japanese consider it “treacherous” to try and transcend the group and feel “ashamed” (54) for doing so. He clarifies the mentality of a Japanese person on this issue:

...the group for him is basically a vital spiritual prop, to be isolated from which would be, more than anything else, to lose his “self” completely in a way that would be intolerable to him. He is obliged, therefore, to choose to belong to the group even at the cost of temporary obliteration of his self. (135)

In this environment, the authority figure commands what shall be learned and even if there is an opportunity for opinion, it is crushed under the weight of the group mentality. Frequently, independent thought is stymied as Japanese students are happy and actually desirous to accept an idea over the assertion of their own—all anathema to critical thinking.²

² This attitude crystallizes with the orientation of Japanese high schools towards passing grueling university entrance exams through the memorization of a massive amount of information rather than being concerned with developing creativity or independent thought. Students study incredibly hard to do well on these tests as it often decides their career path; entrance to a reputable university virtually guarantees them lucrative future employment. These exams serve to illustrate not only how well a student has memorized the required information but also, as Curtis Kelley notes, the test also measures “the degree of compliance to the [Japanese] system. Those who score well demonstrate that they have assimilated the sociocentric values endorsed in high school: self-denial, obedience, and respect for the system (179).

Despite the fact that the current situation in primary and secondary schools in Japan often encourages intuitive thought and group conformity over critical thinking, both universities and the workplace are becoming desirous of students and employees equipped with these skills. Takamitsu Sawa, a professor at Kyoto University, believes the current education system should be “reoriented” because it is not currently “developing the abilities and attitudes required of adults, such as abilities to debate, to read and comprehend, to think scientifically and logically, and to collect and analyze information” (1). Nippon Keidanren (The Japan Business Federation) voices the increasing demand companies have for employees in possession of critical skills: “Corporate employees must develop sophisticated judgment and problem solving skills based on a broader perspective than before. Young people...also need the creativity and reformist approach to create new business models that take an ‘outside the box’ approach” (1). One means which this knowledge and attitude could be fostered is through the application of literary stylistics in the EFL classroom.

Before continuing, one might question the validity of attempting to develop critical thinking in EFL studies when there is the added difficulty of a language barrier. Despite this inherent complexity, in the specific case of the Japanese with English, it could be argued the second language is more of a facilitator than a barrier to critical thinking as the English language can offer the Japanese an opportunity to be more direct and critical both linguistically and culturally than they might otherwise be able to in their native tongue. Doi has observed that language and culture are intertwined: “The typical psychology of a given nation can be learned only through familiarity with its native language. The language compromises everything which is intrinsic to the soul of a nation...” (15). Brown states a similar thought when he mentions, “culture is really

an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language” (45). When considering the Japanese language, it is vague, and pragmatically speaking, often rife with ambiguity and suggestion. Being direct and forthright is frequently considered rude—it being rare to hear an outright refusal or negation. Hesitation is substituted and pressure is put on the listener to infer meaning. The lack of the singular, plural, the definite and indefinite contribute to this ambiguity. Even one’s conception of self is made indistinct and malleable as how a speaker self-references changes depending on the status of the listener. Takao Suzuki’s remarks on this when he observes that terms of self-reference and address in Japanese “are connected with the confirmation of concrete roles based on a superior-inferior dichotomy in human relationships” (157) (This is further compounded by differing gender-based forms of address and vocabulary). All these factors hinder the environment of critical thinking. Not only does English lend itself to more specific expressions and less ambiguity, culturally it encourages equality, independence, freedom of expression and directness giving students not only the means, but the environment to express something they might not be willing, or able, to say in their own language. This is not to claim English as the only suitable language for the appropriation of critical thinking skills, nor is it to ignore the innumerable Japanese who make daily advancements in every field and discipline due to their critical thinking ability without the need of English. However, English need not be considered a hindrance in the attainment of critical thinking skills as it can be of great help in bolstering a critical thinking atmosphere as it favors directness, frankness, and debate.

Literary stylistics is one method that offers an effective way to develop critical thinking skills. It is an approach towards literature that focuses on

the text and assumes it has meaning for the reader to find by examining the linguistics devices an author has used and their effect. Brumfit and Carter, quoting Roger Pearce, cite literary stylistics as “a means of formulating intuition, a means of objectifying it and rendering it susceptible to investigation and, in so doing, a means of feeling out and revising [an] initial interpretation” (4). Literature serves as such an excellent platform for the exercise of critical thought as it has, as Alderson and Short mention paraphrasing Widdowson, “meaning potential” (72). It is often highly self-referential and dense with meaning. Once students begin to participate actively and question ‘why’ certain literary devices or language structures are used over others, they will be rewarded with the ability to see recognizable, logical patterns within the work and achieve deeper understanding of it and most probably, themselves. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to define what exactly literature is, it can be said that it was created with purpose and places demands on the reader to in-turn discover their own thought processes and emotions. Literature has depth that provokes the reader to draw inferences, turn language into meaning, and to continually reevaluate and reassess opinions, thoughts and feelings. In the proper environment of tolerance and freedom of expression, literature exposes people to ambiguity and new situations that encourages judgment and discovery—essentially, *aiding in the creation of a self apart from the group*. Individuality is fostered and freedom of expression is encouraged, all furthering the development of critical thinking.³

³ Literature is currently taught within the Japanese school system but most often in mere preparation for the university entrance exams. The format of the literature component on the exam is for students to read a brief passage and then answer a multiple choice question on the meaning of an underlined segment of the passage. This results in students memorizing the “correct” meaning with no opportunity to offer an individual or creative opinion.

The specific application of literary stylistics incorporates all elements of critical thinking. While various definitions of critical thinking have been proffered, generally it can be categorized into 5 categories:

- Interpretation**: the ability to understand and identify areas of complexity
- Analysis**: the ability to examine, organize, classify, categorize, differentiate, and prioritize variables
- Evaluation**: the ability to assess the significance and applicability of information necessary to support conclusions
- Inference**: the ability to formulate hypotheses or draw conclusions based on the evidence
- Explanation**: the ability to explain the assumptions that lead to the conclusions reached
- Self-regulation**: the ability for self examination and self-correction

(adapted from Assessment Technologies Institute (2005))

This definition has echoes in Ronald Carter's idea that literary stylistics should be applied in a:

...scientific manner, involving bold hypotheses, a process of providing examples and counter examples, leading to refinement of the hypotheses and the setting up of provisional analytical models of sufficient predictive power to provide for a process of continually refined and theoretically self-aware analysis. (16)

While literary stylistics can be put into practice in a variety of ways, the following was one successful method:

In a course that consisted of 26, 90 minute periods, each class was devoted

to an explicit specific literary/linguistic point that was introduced in a few samples of literature. (Usually no more than 1-2 pages of text were given so that the interpretation and analysis of the target point was focused without the pressure of achieving a totality of comprehension.) Using Grammar as an example target point, the instructor would introduce a short segment of a poem and with the students, identify the tense of the piece and examine the effect it has. Not only would the class attempt to grasp the meaning of the grammar (i.e. as it relates to a particular moment in time), they would also try to grapple with the feeling this particular grammar evokes in them. In order to better understand the effect, they might change the tense and compare it to the original and engage in other ‘what if...’ exercises of modification and comparison. Students then worked together in groups on a new piece of literature identifying the target point (interpretation) and attempting to answer how it functions by being prompted with questions such as: *how does it accomplish what it does? how it is effective?* (analysis/evaluation) and *why it is appropriate?* (inference) Students were then merged into new groups where they could share their own ideas (explanation). A last sample was given to them to work on at home, utilizing but not limiting them to, their experience with the target point of the day (explanation/self-regulation) followed by a reflection on their class/homework. Then at the beginning of the next class they would share and defend their ideas amongst their classmates.

Over the semester, a myriad of target points were covered including vocabulary, structure, tone, diction, description, metaphor, simile etc....As each class allowed students to acquire a linguistic tool/literary device, by the end of the course they had a substantial knowledge base from which to draw valid literary inferences and logically consistent hypotheses. A student-

centered approach fostered through the creation of problems, solutions, interpretations, presentations, explanations and idea-sharing, gradually gave students further confidence to develop, state and defend their own opinions with supporting evidence from the text. Class work, assignments and feedback revealed students felt much more confident and capable of not only understanding literature, but also expressing and defending their opinions upon it. Furthermore, feedback revealed that students felt the course had helped them mature and believed that the skills they had learned would benefit them in their future careers.

Although critical thinking skills could be incorporated into the Japanese school system in various ways, literature is one highly effective tool in developing these skills amongst Japanese EFL students. Sadly, literature has fallen somewhat into disfavor with EFL instructors due to its technical difficulty and supposed hindrance in developing reading fluency. Perhaps literature is not suitable for all aspects of language teaching, however, its uses are far from exhausted. Be it a native or non-native speaker, literature has something to say and to teach us all, if we but deign to listen.

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