

THE CULTURAL ASPECT OF COLLEGE LEVEL ENGLISH STUDIES IN JAPAN

Kevin Mark

Introduction

At a time when Japan is searching to redefine its identity in the context of the global community there is a clear need for more people to be able to use the English language effectively, for greater intercultural awareness, and for intelligent attitudes to change. In this spirit I feel that discussion of the objectives of English teaching at college level is both appropriate and necessary. Once we have clear objectives then we are in a position to evaluate whether or not we are good educators.

Nowadays there is of course a good deal of discussion on how to improve language teaching, but there seems to be little attempt to coordinate the objectives of language teaching with those of cultural studies, usually represented by the study of literature. In the four years I spent as an undergraduate majoring in French language and literature I remember hearing almost no-one, faculty member or student, discussing the question of what the objectives of the study of literature at undergraduate level were. Nor have I heard any such discussion in Japan. This is not to say that such discussion does not take place, but it does seem to me that critical enquiry into what the objectives are is not accepted as an important ongoing part of this area of academic life, and certainly not as

part of the fabric of communication between teacher and students.

My wish to present the ideas in this paper has grown in part from a feeling that it is possible to have reasonable grounds for much higher expectations of our students : we have the power, if we wish to direct our energies in this way, to help our students to overcome the lack of motivation and the passivity which they are often characterised as having. In the case of Japanese students the pressure of entrance examinations has had a particularly distorting effect on their attitude to learning and on their ability to use English. Learning has come to be seen as a means above all of getting into university. Once one is in a given university much of the motivation for study has therefore been removed. What we see in students today in Japan and elsewhere is well expressed, I feel, by John Dewey, writing fifty years ago about the effects of traditional education :

“The proper line of attack is that the experiences which were had, by pupils and teachers alike, were largely of a wrong kind. How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them? How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? How many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom? How many found what they did learn so foreign to the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter? How many came to associate books with dull drudgery, so that they were

“conditioned” to all but flashy reading matter?”

(Dewey, 1938 pp. 26, 27)

I hope my ideas in this paper will stimulate thought as to how we can awaken enthusiasm for learning in our students. I am going to present in very general terms an approach to language teaching and to the teaching of foreign culture in Japanese universities. Although a generalised approach such as this inevitably fails to take account of many significant cases the points I make here will not, I hope, lose the general applicability which they are intended to have. In fact I believe they can be usefully related not only to English departments in Japanese universities, but to other situations too, inside and outside of Japan.

I will assume that university departments of English in Japan are, and will continue to be, for the most part concerned with two broad areas of study : what I shall call “cultural studies” on the one hand (most often represented by literary studies), and the development of proficiency in the use of the language on the other.

I will confine my comments on linguistics to this : if it is to be treated as a discipline in its own right then it does not fall within the scope of this paper ; if, on the other hand, it is considered to be part of English studies, then it should be specifically and concretely directed towards the objectives either of cultural studies or to the proficient use of the English language.

We are teaching more than a subject

Before considering what our educational goals might be I would like to say that there are two points which we should bear in mind when approaching the questions of what and how we are teaching. The first is that what is being learned is not simply the subject we are teaching. Indeed it may well be that the subject itself is of secondary importance. We need to be alert to the hidden effects of what we are doing. What kind of thinking are we implicitly suggesting our students develop?

I remember a history teacher I had when I was sixteen. From time to time he would berate us for the immaturity of our thinking, saying we should be able to analyse problems ourselves and draw our own conclusions. Yet most of time we spent in his classes was devoted to taking down his dictated notes in preparation for an examination. The entire class used to be terrified of him, because he would sometimes hit boys who answered his questions incorrectly — to make a mistake in his class was to invite trouble. So in that kind of atmosphere we were learning to be very cautious about what we said, and to protect ourselves we relied very heavily on memorisation of his notes rather than our own ability to think. Although I'm quite sure this teacher really did want our thinking to mature, his teaching was producing the opposite result. Let me give another example. From my office I can see, about seventy-five metres away, into a lecture-hall. When lectures are in progress usually about a quarter of the seats are occupied and the students tend to sit at the back and the lecturer is therefore ten metres or so away from the first row of students. I believe this is very common in many universities. Personally, if I were lecturing, I would ask the students to come to the front, because

I would want to be sensitive to their reactions to what I am saying, and I would want them to feel that I am interested in whether or not they understand. I would also like to communicate that what I am saying is to some extent at least, personal, that I am talking to them as people: I am not just transmitting information. I am sure that the lecturers I see would like it to be felt that they are interested in how well their students are responding to their lectures, but the seating arrangement they accept does not support this.

So with these two very simple examples I am trying to draw attention to the fact that we need to be conscious of everything we are doing in order to ensure that our students receive the messages from us which we would like them to receive. To be alert in this way we have to understand that we are always agents for the transmission of more than a subject.

Every experience transforms the world

The second point I would like to mention is that any experience our students have, even if it is one of indifference, is not only going to influence the future experiences they have, but is also going to have concrete effects in the world. We cannot escape the fact that whatever we do produces an effect in people and in the environment. The future experiences of a student will to some extent be determined by the quality of the experiences he is having now. A student who has what we might call indifferent, passive or negative experiences in class, who is not experiencing that the education we are involving him in is a dynamic and transforming process, will reinforce negative expectations about his own abil-

ity to effect change in himself and in the world around him. What are the global consequences of this? If huge numbers of people are passive and apathetic then the world will continue to become increasingly dehumanized. Thus we have a responsibility to do our best ensure that we create conditions in our classes which are likely to help students to develop the quality of their own thinking and experiences in a healthy way. That responsibility is threefold : to the individual students with whom we come into contact, to the world as a whole, and also to ourselves. I doubt that we will be able to derive anything other than a vain, illusory satisfaction from our work if we neglect the significance of our responsibility to our students and to the world.

One fundamental challenge facing education

For me there is a single, very obvious challenge facing education today, which encompasses all others. It is not something which educators alone must face, but we are privileged to have perhaps more time than many to reflect and translate our conclusions into action. The challenge I see is this : to help the average person, the individual, to see that he has, in spite of the complexity of society, in spite of the enormity of the world's problems and in spite of his own apparently limited abilities, an important role to play. Thus the framework of objectives I wish to propose for cultural studies is based on the underlying theme of "Creating change — in ourselves and in the world".

Creating change — in ourselves and in the world

The framework which I see for cultural studies in an English department can be depicted as a triangle, the sides of which are three fields

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within the broader area of cultural studies. They are : the world's problems, the individual and his search for identity, and thirdly intercultural awareness and communication. Obviously these aspects of cultural studies will need some elaboration, but I would first like to point out that in each case I consider that English literature can be the primary source of material. This is obviously important since probably such studies would have to be under the aegis of those of our colleagues who are literature specialists. It will be useful therefore to consider how the teaching of literature is conventionally approached, and to compare this to approach I am proposing. I hope, however, that it will be understood that in general my use of the word "literature" could be substituted by "culture", "history", "western society" etc.. When I refer in this discussion to English literature I intend it to be taken as encompassing all native English literatures. In addition I am considering that classes in literature — cultural studies — can be approached either as English or Japanese-medium study. Classes might equally well be in either language. It is important, in this regard, to make a distinction between studying in English and learning to become proficient in English since in the former case proficiency is not a primary objective.

Translation should play a secondary role

It is apparent that, in the minds of many students and teachers, the translation that typically takes place in a literature class represents an important part of the student's work towards developing his linguistic proficiency. I include myself among the many who consider that translation is an inefficient way of doing this. More serious, however, is the fact that it is inevitable that emphasis on translation as an important compo-

ment of a literature class will de-emphasise other objectives. In addition translation classes often, but not necessarily, severely limit student participation ; and inasmuch as the student depends on the teacher for notions of correctness, passivity rather than autonomy is encouraged ; finally, it is easy for a translation-based approach to literature to result in a perception of the subject of study as something static rather than dynamic. My proposal is therefore that if translation is considered to be necessary, and there are some good reasons why it might be, it should nevertheless be of secondary importance, since there are cultural objectives which we need to explore. Progress towards linguistic proficiency can most efficiently be achieved in a course designed specifically to meet that objective.

The study of literature is a key to understanding, not an end in itself

It would appear that, typically and conventionally, two considerations figure prominently in determining what type of literature is selected for study in a literature class. The first is that the teacher selects material on the basis of what he feels qualified to teach, usually his specialities. I feel that the cultural objectives I am going to suggest below, inasmuch as they de-emphasise the study of literature as a field of specialisation, might lead a teacher to see that he is able to use a wider range of material than he would otherwise feel qualified to use. A related point, incidentally, is that it appears that all too often the teacher does not feel it is incumbent on him to take the students' interests and needs into account. Of course, before he can do that he has to give thought to what these are. The second consideration in deciding what material to use in teaching is whether or not a particular work or author has the stamp of

respectability : it is possible, without giving much thought to the reasons, to accept that there are certain authors and works with which, according to conventional wisdom, students ought to be familiar.

The cultural objectives I am going to propose imply that tradition for convention should not be decisive in the selection of material for study. Material should be based not only on the quality of the literature itself and the relevance of its content to our purposes, but also on the quality of the response we hope it will elicit in students. It must be susceptible to use in the kind of class we would like to have. This is of course, only common sense, but it is a point worth underlining nevertheless.

We should avoid early specialisation

There needs to be an understanding that the reputation of a text or author or the difficulty of the material grappled with do not reflect the depth of study taking place. Often, I suspect, students are attempting to read material in English which is beyond the level of books which they would personally choose to read in their own language. There is a truth we should remember when planning our literature courses : a person can be deeply affected by an insight gained through reflecting on something quite simple. The depth and significance of the study taking place reside primarily in the student and in the teacher. We should feel free, therefore, if it seems appropriate, to select short extracts from a wide range of material, aiming to stimulate the majority of the students. The interest of the minority who may be disposed towards specialisation in literature will not thereby be diminished. In fact they would ultimately benefit as specialists from seeing literature from a very wide perspective before

specialising.

The process should be one of dialogue

For real learning to take place the students need to experience the study process as dynamic rather than static. It should be possible for them to appreciate that dialogue, which is a stimulus to change and implies a redefinition of our perception of ourselves and the world, can be taking place on many levels. In approaching literature there can be

- a) dialogue between the author and himself
- b) dialogue between the author and his reader
(in this case these are the teacher and each student)
- c) dialogue between the class and the teacher
- d) dialogue between each student and the teacher
- e) dialogue between students
- f) dialogue between each student and himself
- g) dialogue between the teacher and himself

If we look on the study of literature as an exploration of these dimensions of dialogue then it becomes apparent that the teacher must be imaginative in deciding how he approaches the subject, and imaginative in the sense of seeing things from the point of view of his students.

There is not scope here to explore the alternatives to a lecture-style approach : seminars, project work, surveys etc., so I hope it will suffice to say that, if we decide to take lecture-style approach, the decision should be consciously taken, and for reasons other than the mere fact this is the customary approach.

The world's problems

I find it interesting to consider the world's problems as boiling down to four fundamental issues : conflict (or "war") poverty, oppression and the destruction of the environment. To some extent at least we have a responsibility to inform our students on these issues and to encourage them to reflect on them. They need to be looked at in terms, as I said above, of "creating change". It is therefore helpful to look at these not as one-dimensional, but rather as the reverse side of a coin, as problems which have solutions. Thus the theme of conflict can be thought of as being the counterpart of another theme which I would call "growth out of conflict". I choose this term because the word "peace" has connotations which can reduce its meaning to a static condition, the "absence of war". Poverty and oppression are each counterbalanced by the theme of "justice" and the destruction of the environment by that of "respect for nature". It would not be fruitful, I feel, to attempt to organise a literature course exploring these themes in such a way that one of the main functions is to provide information on current affairs. Rather I feel it would be the task of the teacher to search for material, probably short extracts from potentially any period, which express how these issues have been experienced, approached and expressed by writers.

The individual and his search for identity

The second area of cultural studies which I have mentioned is that of the individual and his search for identity. I do not think it is trite to say that students want to be happy. If we ourselves have genuinely reached some degree of happiness and have cultivated the ability to think critically and constructively about ourselves (important provisos, of course)

than we are in a position to help our students to direct their thinking in ways which will be both interesting and helpful to them. Useful questions which we can encourage students to think about and try to answer include these : What am I doing? How have I become what I am? Where do I want to go? How am I changing? How do others see me? What are my beliefs? This area of study can also be usefully approached through the study of relationships : students can consider their relationships with members of their family, with their peers, with the opposite sex, or with authority. I see no reason at all why the study of a foreign literature should not be used to stimulate this kind of thinking. These questions have been expressed eloquently and powerfully by a good many writers, so why not use literature in this way? If we can do so the students' response is likely to be one which not only demonstrates their own interest, but which also challenges us to reflect.

Intercultural awareness and communication

In this area of study the sense of change can be taken as "changing awareness". On a simple level students have a need for basic information, about daily life, history, attitudes, values and behaviours common to English-speaking cultural groups. But studies of this kind should go much further than factual information. They should help to broaden the range of what a person sees as relevant in understanding a situation, and they should be a helpful background for intelligent action in unfamiliar intercultural situations in the future. But before they can be of such practical benefit in working and social contacts with foreign cultures they should serve as the basis of reflection. They will need to be seen by the student not only as a means of understanding another culture, but of understand-

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ing himself as a Japanese.

Here is a possible, and certainly not exhaustive catalogue of topics relevant to this area of cultural studies :

- 1) How the Japanese are seen by members of the culture under study.
- 2) Traditional marital roles in the foreign culture and in Japan.
This could be extended to a look at how these roles have changed in modern times and how they are continuing to change.
- 3) Attitudes to
 - a) social class, status and respectability ;
 - b) authority ;
 - c) education ;
 - b) work and leisure.
- 4) Values, including
 - a) religion and attitudes to religion ;
 - b) personal and collective morality ;
 - c) heroes.
- 5) The relationship of mythology to enduring attitudes and values.
- 6) Body language and its affective correlates.
- 7) How similar emotions are expressed differently by Japanese and by members of the culture being studied.
- 8) The difficulty of translating accurately from one language to another, particularly in social situations.
- 9) The dynamics of group pressure in Japan and in the foreign culture.
- 10) How conflict is dealt with in Japan and in the foreign culture.
- 11) Culture-based conflicts and misunderstandings.

- 12) Reflection on and study of actual experience of students with the foreign culture.
- 13) Stereotypic attitudes to members of different races, nationalities and cultures.

Resources

I have indicated that literature can serve as the primary source of material for courses in cultural studies of the kind I am suggesting. However, in any literature class it can be very helpful to make use of videos, photographs, sculpture and music to bring alive the content for students, and I would like to see such resources being made use of more. In particular some of the dramatisations of the classics which have been produced by the BBC and other British television companies are very much worth making use of. They can be extraordinarily effective in illustrating descriptive language and of course also in communicating both verbally and non-verbally the spirit of a work. If one is not under the constraint of offering a specifically literary course then one might well feel free to go further and to make extensive use of newspaper and magazine articles, children's literature, cartoons and so on.

Of course the area of cultural studies which I have outlined is enormous, a fact which highlights three important points : the first is that the teacher needs to select carefully from the many possible aspects of cultural studies, keeping in mind particular objectives for a particular class ; he also needs to bear in mind that a very limited amount of material can yield tremendous results if it is of the appropriate quality and if it is presented effectively. A single extract, text or author can be looked at

from all three aspects of what I have called cultural studies. Alternatively one can look at three extracts or texts which consider a single theme from the three points of view I've suggested. If one wanted to explore the theme of marriage, for example, one could select three separate pieces which deal with this theme from each point of view : in terms, say, of oppression, of a search for oneself, and in terms of a particular culture, or a social class within a culture. A critical comparison of the language and style could support these approaches.

One of the advantages of studying texts with this framework is the possibility it offers of helping the students towards a holistic view of themselves, the world and of their studies. It is potentially a means of developing critical, evaluating and creative thought, of stimulating curiosity, awareness, participation, confidence and responsibility.

An illustration

Wordsworth's "The Rainbow" as an illustration of the three aspects of cultural studies

My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky :
So was it when my life began ;
So it is now I am a man ;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is Father of the Man ;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

No doubt this poem is frequently studied by students both in Japan and

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elsewhere. I would like to illustrate below, how even a piece of writing such as this, which might at first sight seem solely applicable to the theme of "the individual and his search for identity", can in fact be related to the themes of "the world's problems" or "intercultural awareness and communication". This is not intended to be an exhaustive critical exercise, but rather one which is suggestive of possibilities related to the three themes of cultural studies I have outlined above. The following questions could be used with students, either directly as they stand, or implicitly in guided discussion. They can be used before or after reading the poem. In some cases possible answers are given in italics as a further stimulus for students.

A. Identity :

1. What experiences of beauty do you remember as a child?
2. What moves you deeply nowadays?
3. On the deepest level, are you the same, now, as the person you were when you were a baby?
4. Is it possible to feel beauty moment to moment? If not, why not?
5. Do we lose our capacity to feel joy and beauty as we grow older? If so, why, and is it inevitable?
6. "The child is father of the Man"
 - a) Is it possible to think that "growth" in adulthood is a process through which we "unlearn" in order to be able to experience life as purely as we did when we were children?
 - b) In some sense, can your parents, teachers and so on learn from you? Are you, in other words, a parent of your parents?

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B. Culture and communication :

1. In Christianity there is the notion that to enter the kingdom of heaven one's heart must be like that of a child. Are there any similar notions in your own culture?

2. What does a rainbow mean to you?

3. What is the significance of the rainbow in the Bible? *It is a symbol of God's promise to Noah to preserve humanity.*

What does the rainbow mean in your own culture? Does the number 7 have any special significance in your culture?

4. In modern culture where do we see the rainbow?

Greenpeace, for example, has a ship called the "Rainbow Warrior".

In Japan we see it in a variety of contexts : on TV's "Okaasan to issho", for example, and very commonly in second-hand car displays.

What significance can we see in these examples?

5. In English there is an expression : "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." *Is the poem talking about human beings' ability to appreciate rainbows etc.?*

C. The World's problems :

Obviously it is most readily possible to focus on the environment.

1. When, in your own life, do you experience the kinds of feelings Wordsworth is talking about?

2. Do you feel that you yourself are a part of nature? If yes, how do you experience this? For example, intellectually, emotionally?

If not, why not?

3. Does humanity love nature? If so, why do we have environmental problems? If not, why not?

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4. Do you love nature? If so, how does your life reflect this?
5. Is humanity changing with regard to the environment?

Conclusion

I hope that the ideas I have presented here will serve to stimulate thought and discussion on how we can better meet the needs of our students in today's world. I am suggesting that our approach within English departments can be very much more richly and successfully carried out if we think in terms of the three themes of cultural studies I have outlined. The study of English can be, more than it is today, a window from Japan onto the world, a bridge between each person and that world, and mirror for each individual.

Reference

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