

Teaching Literature in Translation in the EFL Classroom

Kathryn M. Tanaka
Otemae University

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In this paper, I consider two topics of EFL research: the use of literature in the EFL classroom and the recent movement to incorporate nativized material into the curriculum. Combining the advantages of these pedagogical tactics, I argue for use of mirror texts—L1 texts and their L2 translations. I demonstrate several ways in which the use of mirror texts, by providing a scaffolding of familiar cultural contexts, can provide a grounds for students to interact with language at concrete and creative levels and allow for productive engagement with both form and meaning. Finally, I offer practical suggestions on how to incorporate literature in translation into the classroom, drawing from my courses in literature taught at Otemae University in Japan.

本論は、外国語としての英語教育において、二つの研究話題を考察する：EFL教室での文学の使用と近年流行のネイティブ化された資料をカリキュラムに取り入れる。この二つの指導法を融合し、本論は「ミラーテキスト」、つまりL1のテキストとL2の翻訳書を同時に使用する意義について論じる。よく知っている文化的脈絡を足場として、どのようにミラーテキストを使って、学生たちが具体的な、そして創造性に富んだレベルの言語を使い、言語の形態や意味に対して、積極的に関与していけるようないくつかの方法について述べる。最後に、著者が大手前大学の文学の講義にて用いるテクニックを紹介しながら、英訳された日本文学作品をどのように授業に活用できるかを提示していく。

THIS PAPER combines two research threads of EFL that have received increasing attention in recent years. The first is the use of literature as a pedagogical tool in the L2 classroom. The second is the burgeoning movement to draw on and incorporate culturally familiar themes and contexts in foreign language education. In seeking to create a dialogue between these two areas, I argue for the use of literary texts in translation in the EFL classroom. First, I present the advantages of incorporating literature into the EFL classroom, followed by an argument for the importance of integrating culturally familiar texts and a demonstration of the advantages of using literature in translation and mirror texts (an original L1 text and its L2 translation) as a tool (Tanaka, 2015). Finally, the paper concludes with concrete examples of how to use literature in translation to teach poetry and fiction by drawing on my courses at Otemae University, a private institution in Nishinomiya, Japan.

Since the 1980s, literature has been advocated as an important addition to EFL curricula, in part because of its value in teaching culture as well as language. Indeed, Carter and Long (1991) laid out three models for the use of literature in the classroom, arguing literature can be used to teach culture, language, and personal growth. Here, I focus on the use of literature to teach language,

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although to a great extent these uses are inseparable. Proponents of using literature to teach language contend that literary texts teach skills that cannot be learned from a textbook, and they introduce students to authentic language usage (Brumfit & Carter, 1986, pp. 15-16).

By authentic, I mean that literature is written for a native English speaker while at the same time containing multiple registers of language. Literary forms, as renowned critic Terry Eagleton (2013) has argued, are “matrices capable of generating a whole range of possible meanings. They do not contain meaning so much as produce it” (p. 144). He went on to argue that meaning is bound up in culture and is created collectively. Thus, a work of literature is ambiguous in that it can be approached from multiple angles; this is what makes literature unique among “authentic” texts. My use of authentic differs from the typical definition of the term as used in EFL education—any text for genuine communication written by and for native-level speakers, such as newspapers or medical prescriptions.

However, this very authenticity presents challenges. The language registers are not the only problem; the unfamiliar cultural contexts are also cited as a difficulty in introducing literary texts into the classroom (Maley & Duff, 1989; McKay, 2001). Indeed, as Floris (2005) noted in her argument for English language literature written by Asian authors in the Asian EFL classroom, EFL students often struggle with unfamiliar cultural contexts when reading literature. She further argued that when both the content and language are unfamiliar, it becomes incredibly difficult for students to understand literary texts and productively engage with either the material’s content or its linguistic features. Although Floris suggested that English language texts by Asian authors can overcome some of this difficulty, I believe that another way to draw on the benefits of literature while at the same time lessening some of its difficulties is to use L1 literature in translation in the L2 classroom and teach with mirror texts.

Cultural Familiarity and Nativization of Texts

As English receives increasing attention as a global language, the question of the retention of cultural specificity and the hierarchies of Englishes have become topics of interest to EFL educators (Kachru & Nelson, 2001; Kirkpatrick, 2002; Pennycook, 1994). It is apparent that language education is shifting from ESL to EFL, or even to English as a global language. Such a shift necessitates a reconsideration of the ways in which culture and language shape each other and the ways in which culture is incorporated into the language classroom. Beginning with the groundbreaking work of Steffensen, Joag-Dev, and Anderson (1979), educators and researchers have been reexamining the importance of L1 cultural contexts as a strategy in L2 language education. The place of local culture and the importance of diversity within global Englishes has become an important topic of debate over the past 15 years (Alptekin, 2006; Erten & Razi, 2009; Tavakoli, Shirinbakhsh, & Rezazadeh, 2013).

In fact, research bears out the benefits of using what Alptekin (2006) has referred to as nativization, which he describes as the “sociological, semantic and pragmatic adaptation of the textual and contextual cues of the original story into the learner’s own culture, while keeping its linguistic and rhetorical content essentially intact” (p. 497). Focusing on learner-centered pedagogy, Alptekin and other researchers have demonstrated that nativization of foreign texts increases both literal and inferential comprehension (Alptekin, 2006; Erten & Razi, 2009; Tavakoli et al., 2013) as well as vocabulary retention (Pulido, 2004).

The importance of cultural familiarity in EFL education has begun to attract attention in Japan as well. Chihara, Sakurai, and Oller (1989, 2007) first demonstrated that students’ cloze scores improve when English names of people and places are changed to Japanese, indicating that minor changes to meet readers’ cultural expectations yielded clear positive benefits. Sasaki (2000) replicated their results while also showing improved verbal recall of vocabulary and content by students who read culturally familiar texts. Although these

are small-scale studies and more research is needed, results thus far support the notion that nativized texts are effective EFL teaching tools because by drawing on L1 cultural schema they familiarize the content and context.

Using literature in translation from L1 is an extension of this type of textual nativization. The use of L1 literature in translation draws on the benefits of nativization and serves a similar psychological function: Students have a scaffold to support them in their familiarity with their own cultures. Such texts are effective in two ways: first, the cultural context is familiar. When the cultural context is familiar, students gain confidence to voice their opinions and lead the conversation.

A second advantage literature in translation has over nativized versions of English texts is the fact that mirror texts can be used outside of class. Thus, teaching literature in translation not only provides cultural scaffolding, but also linguistic scaffolding, especially for timid or unmotivated students. Students can be encouraged to read the two texts in tandem. For students not confident in their language ability, these texts provide an additional degree of scaffolding; for more advanced students the points of comparison between the two versions are often fruitful conversation starters. Both of these points will be elaborated below in my discussion of concrete classroom practice.

How to Use Japanese Literature in Translation

Teaching L1 literature in English translation can help overcome the difficulty students face in reading a text that is foreign both in content and in language. Here, I would like to introduce both poetry and short story teaching techniques. The techniques I outline in this section are drawn primarily from a course I teach at Otemae University, an introduction to modern Japanese literature in English translation. This is an upper level content course taught in English, and the majority of the students are intermediate-to-advanced Japanese learners of English, with TOEIC scores ranging from about

500 to 750, although some lower level students enroll in the course as well. The class tends to be small, with around 10 students with mixed levels of English ranging from native speaker to low intermediate. In addition, the students in the course in general have no background in literature.

There are many ways to focus an EFL class around literature. For multiple levels in a single classroom, or for students new to the study of literature, I have found that focusing on short stories, portions of novels, and poetry can be an engaging way to organize a class while introducing students to a variety of authors and literary genres. Students are assigned one short story or several poems per class, in addition to a worksheet that asks very broad questions about character, theme, and what the students think is interesting about the story. The worksheet helps students articulate their thoughts about the piece before class, and for shy students this can be a helpful reference during class. The worksheet also helps guide class discussion, as students have prepared points about the text that they found interesting (see Figure 1).

- Summarize the story/poem. What is it about?
- Describe the structure of the work. How is the story/poem narrated?
- Who are the characters in this short story?
- What are some important themes in the story/poem?
- What did you think was most interesting about the story/poem? Why?

Figure 1. Example worksheet questions.

This worksheet is assigned in the case of both poetry and short stories. In general, however, discussions of short stories tend to focus on narrative and content, whereas discussions of poetry often revolve around content and literary properties.

Teaching Poetry in Translation

To give an example of a poetry lesson, for one class on Yosano Akiko (1878-1942) that proved quite popular, students were assigned several of her *tanka* (a Japanese poetic form consisting of 31 syllables split into lines of 5-7-5-7-7) from *Tangled Hair* (Yosano, 2002/1901): a free-verse anti-war poem, “Beloved, you must not die” (2005/1905), and several free-verse poems Yosano wrote about childbirth (Yosano, 2008/1915). Questions on the worksheet asked students to think about gender and commonalities between the pieces, such as taboo subjects and female passion.

The classroom discussion, led by students, revolved around the cultural norms that define expressions of male and female experience. Students also discussed how the different poetic styles changed what Yosano was able to express, noting the ways she used allusion and metaphor to expand the meaning of her verses. They pointed out meanings that were contained within the Japanese version, but lost in the English version.

The class ended with a discussion and a group translation of another anti-war *tanka* Yosano wrote in 1937 that was discovered last summer. Together in class, we read a short, English-language newspaper article that described the person who discovered the poem. The article gave the Japanese poem and its English translation as: “*Akikaze ya/ Ikusa hajimari/ Minato nari/ Tadano fune sae/ Mite kanashikere* [I stand at a port in the autumn wind, as a war starts. Even an ordinary ship makes me feel sad to see]” (Isomura, 2014). In groups students reworked the *tanka* (see Figure 2).

秋風や/いくさ始まり/港なり/ただの船さえ/見て悲しけれ		
With autumn wind	Autumn wind	The autumn wind
The war started	The war begins	The beginning of war
At the port	In the harbor	In the harbor
Even seeing a common boat	I see an ordinary boat	Seeing an ordinary boat

Figure 2. Group translations of *tanka*.

As a class, we compared translations and reevaluated the original. Students felt the newspaper’s translations ignored the poetic form, and every group felt a consideration of form as well as content was necessary. After much debate, conducted largely in English, the students arrived at a class translation:

The autumn wind
The beginning of war
In the harbor
Even seeing an ordinary ship
Makes me sad

There is a difference between the newspaper’s, the groups’, and the class’s translation, and this became a very productive way to talk about language, syntax, grammar, and nuances in meaning. For example, questions debated by students included: What is the difference between a port and a harbor? Should common or ordinary be used? Is the final adjective in present or past tense? Does the ship *make* her feel sad, or is she simply sad? Should an English translation of *tanka* be broken into five lines of 5-7-5-7-7, or is that an impossibility? How can we reflect the formal literary properties of the Japanese version in English?

In this way, literature allowed for a combined focus on literary form and meaning, two aspects of language learning that are normally presented as mutually incompatible objects of attention. In addition, the exercise allowed students to argue for their understanding of the piece. Many had opinions about how the translation should be shaped and what was important to foreground in the English translation. Furthermore, as students re-engaged with the same text multiple times and on different levels, they gained confidence and learned from the way their peers translated the text.

Teaching Short Fiction in Translation

Short stories can be used in a similar way; students are assigned a text and a worksheet that asks the students very broad questions about themes, characters, and contexts. As they complete the worksheets, students pick up on the material that interests them and often raise questions that the class discusses. For example, in a class on Ueda Akinari's (1734-1809) "The Kibitsu Cauldron" (Ueda, 2007/1776), students argued about whether or not the female protagonist, Isora, was indeed an ideal wife or not. In the story, Isora is depicted as selflessly serving her husband, Shotaro, even when he takes her money and runs away with his mistress. Heartbroken at his desertion, Isora dies. Her angry spirit then devours Shotaro. Some students argued that Isora was an ideal wife, and Shotaro was wrong. Others argued that Isora could not have been a perfect wife or she would never have eaten Shotaro. This debate foregrounded changing cultural notions of romantic love and feminine perfection.

For advanced students, the nuances and differences between the Japanese original and English translations can be fruitful conversation starters and can also serve to introduce comparative culture into the classroom. For example, in a class about Tanizaki Jun'ichiro's "The Tattooer" (Tanizaki, 1963/1910), a student pointed out the differences in the female protagonist's speech patterns in

the Japanese and English versions. A power shift occurs within the piece, and the woman's speech patterns shift from very polite to very direct. In the student's opinion, this was not adequately reflected in the English translation. She asked questions about linguistic registers of politeness, and then as a class the students and I worked through how this could have been better reflected in English translation. Thus, while based in Japanese literature, the conversation used mirror texts to productively engaged questions of status, gender, and politeness in English-speaking cultures. In this way, literary texts in translation can be used to comparatively introduce L2 culture into the class as well.

Literature classes can also include creative activities that are based on debate and careful readings of the original text. For example, students often raise questions about what might happen after the end of a story. Often, students express dissatisfaction with the ambiguity of many endings of Japanese fiction. This dissatisfaction can become a productive exercise in which students can be asked to rewrite the ending or to imagine a sequel to the story. This is a way to creatively engage students' interest while still grounding arguments in engagement with the original piece.

Creative exercises can also provide a platform to talk about L2 culture as well, through exercises such as a cultural swap. I ask students if the story could take place in another country, and the students imagine what would be different. This allows students to think about how important Japanese cultural contexts are to the original piece and to think about how culture changes perspectives. Other activities include a time swap, or a prequel, or how the story would change if it was told by a minor character or if the gender of the main character changed.

Evaluating Student Work

One of the problems with the use of literature is the relative difficulty of evaluating student performance. Indeed, Maley (2001)

argued that a reason literature fell out of favor with educators was the lack of evidence that literature could provide effective linguistic input. While the literature classes I teach are primarily discussion-based, I do distribute worksheets, as discussed above, and I employ a 5-point rubric to grade students' work (Figure 3).

Following are three excerpts of student worksheets from a class discussion of Hojo Tamio's novella, *Life's First Night* (Hojo, 2015/1936). In the novella, the main character, Oda Takao, is admitted to a quarantine hospital because he has been diagnosed with Hansen's disease. Students were in groups discussing their answers to the worksheet questions (Figure 4). Both the worksheets and participation in class were evaluated according to the rubric.

In this case, the student-led discussion focused on the translation of the title and the importance of *night* and *life*. Student A, for example, noted the importance of the word *shoya* in the original

Japanese title, bringing nuances to the way the title could be understood that are glossed over through translating the phrase simply as *first night*. Student B, while recognizing the importance of *life* in the title, argued that rather than *night*, *morning* should be foregrounded, as the story ends with the hopeful dawn of a new day. Finally, the other students in C's group responded to C's answer to the question "What is important about the title?" by asking him to clarify why he did not like it and how it could be changed to something that captured his interest. In this way, students often pushed each other and asked questions based on worksheet answers. The style of response given below was typical; students would write longer, more detailed responses when they were interested in the piece we read, such as Student B in this example. At the same time, students who were less interested or motivated, such as Student C in the following example, still answered the questions and raised valid points that became a basis for classroom discussion.

Task	Grade				
	5	4	3	2	1
Summary and character description (Content)	Provides thoughtful details with textual examples	Provides thoughtful details and a complete summary	Provides a good summary with minimal detail	Provides inadequate summary with minimal details	Provides an inadequate summary with no details
Connections between literary content and form	Is attentive to textual features and form, gives examples from the text, provides detailed commentary	Notes textual features or form, superficial engagement with the text	Notes textual features or form, minimal engagement with text	Limited engagement with textual features or form, no textual examples	No engagement with textual form, no examples.
Questions and critical thinking	Detailed answers to all questions and raises text-based and thoughtful questions	Answers all questions and raises text-based, thoughtful questions	Answers most questions and asks text-based questions	Answers some questions and asks at least one question	Answers few questions and asks none.

Figure 3. Examples of a grading rubric.

Student A is a high-intermediate student who was new to literature but motivated. (4 pts on rubric).

What is important about the title?

The important point is “shoya.” It means the start of Oda’s life newly. His old life before he enters the hospital becomes past. In Japanese dictionary, “shoya” means the time between 7–9 o’clock. Another meaning is the first night of newly married couple. I think that it means the switch for the change the life.

How does Hojo Tamio talk about life and death?

He wrote Oda’s conflict between the hope of life and the despair of life. Oda wants to die. Only the people aspire to die strongly, then killing themselves can succeed. Hojo wants to say, human can’t die easy.

Did you like this story? Why or why not?

I like this story. Because I’m interested in Oda’s character. He has the humanity. He worried, despaired, and has the little hope. His emotion is fluid. But it’s interesting point.

Student B is an advanced EFL student studying literature who was highly motivated. (5 pts. on rubric).

What is important about the title?

The important thing about the title is that it gives us some images about the story before we read the book. In the case of “Life’s First Night,” I imagined the book was connected with someone’s life when I looked the title. But as I read further, the meaning of the title became clear. One of the important themes in the story is the energy of life. The patients were cut off from the general society and treated as if they were prisoner. However they have life to live, as Saeki said to Oda, “Even though I’m like this, I’m still alive.” Saeki’s words and actions have full of energy. I think energy comes from lie. Therefore these patients have life, no matter what their appearances are. So I think that the title gives us the contents of the story shortly and vividly. However, considering the end of the story and morning is the starting of the day, I think “Life’s First Morning” is more suitable title for this book. Because morning which has brilliant sun is appropriate for

making a new start.

How does Hojo Tamio talk about life and death?

Hansen’s Disease destroys the human body and it seems like they are not human and people think they are dead. But they have still flickering life. And when the patients completely accept the life of the disease, they are revived as human like phoenixes.

Did you like this story? Why or why not?

I like Hojo’s story very much. I was moved by Saeki’s every word to Oda and his attitude towards the patients. People who do not have diseases have chance to difficulties in their life. When they face difficulties, first they accept them, and then discover a path to move forward, as Saeki said to Oda. I think this way is easier to live for people.

Student C is a low-intermediate student with low motivation who read the texts in Japanese but participated in English in the class discussion (2-3 pts. on rubric).

What is important about the title?

I think the title is not so important. I don’t understand the meaning. It doesn’t make interested in the story.

How does Hojo Tamio talk about life and death?

The story has rai but the death is try to suicide. It’s tragedy of no cure.

Did you like this story? Why or why not?

It’s complicated story, I can’t say like or not. But it makes me think. So I think it is good.

Figure 4. Three examples of student responses to Hojo Tamio's novella *Life's First Night*.

Note: The Japanese term used by Hojo in the piece is *rai*, roughly equivalent to the English term “leprosy.” For more, see the introduction to the English translation of *Life's First Night* (Hojo, 2015/1936)

Conclusion

In recent years, studies have demonstrated the impact nativized texts can have on L2 education. In a similar vein, much research has also been devoted to the impact literature can have in language instruction. This paper has suggested that using L1 literature in translation in the L2 classroom allows for the benefits of using literature in the EFL classroom while lessening some of the challenges typically associated with it. The familiar cultural contexts give students confidence to discuss the material in the classroom. It encourages them to actively think about language in a way that textbooks do not.

Using literary translations and mirror texts in the EFL classroom has the potential to stimulate interesting classroom discussions and can also be used in creative activities to further engage students. For example, as suggested above, the use of mirror texts helps students develop a sensitivity to linguistic registers. This potential can be further encouraged through translation experiments or activities that expand or extend the original text.

At the same time, through mirror texts and the classroom discussions about them, students gain concrete language skills. They acquire a deeper understanding of the analysis of grammar, syntax, and nuance, and become more sensitive readers of English. The connections they make between cultural contexts demonstrate the effectiveness of Japanese literature in translation as a powerful tool to raise students' awareness of English language and culture as well as their own.

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