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Teaching Japanese American Literature as a Part of English Language Education

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With the advancement of technology, today's generation of students find increasing sources of entertainment and distractions such as games and social networking sites. Unlike the previous generation, they watch less television and they read even less. Teachers cannot expect previous reading experience of literature whether it be in the first language or the second. Krashen points out that "reading in the first language... can profoundly accelerate the reading ability in the second language" as "much of this (reading) ability transfers to the second language, even when the writing systems are different"(147). Krashen is referring to the the situation of EFL students in the U.S. but it is an unfortunate reality that the majority of students in Japan also do little reading in their first language. As a result, the reading assignments in literature courses in university represent for some the only opportunities to face reading in a foreign language.

In this paper I will discuss how I teach Japanese American literature to Department of English students in the Faculty of Education at Kumamoto University. Throughout the course, students learn to recognize basic literary concepts, practice close reading, and engage in group discussions. In addition, I introduce the history behind the story, namely that of the Japanese American experience in the U.S. with special attention to the internment during World War II. I will explain how I chose the readings, my approach to teaching this literature, and students' response to the class. Lastly, I will address challenges that I found in teaching this course and possible ways to address these problems.

A Brief Description of the Course

American Literature Seminar II is a required literature course for 3rd year English Education students. Student enrollment ranges from 25-35 students of various levels of English ability. The aims I established for this course are: 1) to improve reading ability; 2) to make use of previous background knowledge (i.e. modern Japanese history); 3) to understand basic literary concepts such as setting, plot, character, point of view, and theme; 4) to interpret underlying meaning and make valid arguments both verbally during class discussions and in writing during exams. The course focuses on reading authentic texts written by Japanese American writers whose writing styles range from simple (Toshio Mori) to more sophisticated (Hisaye Yamamoto). I chose the works of Japanese American writers because they share some cultural similarities with Japanese people; therefore, the hurdle regarding understanding cultural differences would be somewhat reduced. The special characteristics of this class are: 1) I conduct it mainly in English; 2) students primarily use English in group discussion and only English on the written exams; 3) the class is centered on student discussion and I try to limit my role to teaching unknown expressions, literary terms, and cultural and historical background. I act mainly as a guide and model, encouraging students to do basic research and come up with their own interpretations and conclusions.

Choice of Reading Material

My choice of reading material was based on the following criteria: 1) the English was relatively easy to read in terms of vocabulary; 2) the cultural aspects are both familiar (Japanese) and unfamiliar (American), so students can easily relate to some aspects and compare and contrast Japanese culture with American culture; 3) the stories show one kind of American literature that is not well-known to them (i.e. one kind of minority literature) and breaks stereotypes of what it means to be "American"; 4) demonstrates English that is not always spoken perfectly, yet is fully communicative;

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5) shows a little known part of American history and problematic race relations that continue to this day. With these matters in mind, I chose the following two short stories and excerpts from two novels:

1. Toshio Mori's "Tomorrow is Coming, Children" from *Yokohama, California*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1985.
2. John Okada's *No-No Boy* (Chapters 1 and 6). Seattle: U of Washington P, 1976.
3. Hisaye Yamamoto's "Wilshire Bus" from *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2011.
4. Naomi Hirahara's *Summer of the Big Bachi* (Chapter 1). New York: Dell, 2008.

Method of Teaching

Each reading is covered in about 2 class periods. The first class deals with the historical background and the biography of the author. I also go over new or difficult vocabulary and idiomatic expressions and their usages. The students are divided into groups of 3 or 4 and I give the students about 10 minutes to answer basic comprehension-type questions, summarize the story in a few sentences, and offer their general reaction to the story (e.g. difficulty of reading, opinion about the main character). I also introduce literary elements such as setting, plot, irony, figurative language, point of view, and theme. Students are also given a handout with discussion questions as homework and told to read the story several times. The second class is centered on group discussion of the homework and on understanding literary elements introduced in the first class. Basically the first class covers the language and the events of the story while the second class delves into the motivations of the characters, the importance of the point of view, and themes running through the stories. Thus, the second class presents the most challenges to the students and is the real test of how much they have really gotten out of the readings.

A Brief Summary of Lesson Plans for the First Three Classes

The first story covered in the course is Mori's "Tomorrow is Coming, Children," the story of a 1st generation immigrant grandmother who tells her 3rd generation American-born grandchildren about the struggles she faced and overcame when she first came to the U.S. while they are in an internment camp. The following is an example of lesson plans for the three classes covering Mori's story, which includes the first day of the course.

In the first class, I cover the origins of Japanese immigration to other countries such as the U.S. and the circumstances in Japan that made this possible. Students are encouraged to recall their knowledge of modern Japanese history from high school, such as the matter of national isolation during the Edo Era and the changes brought about by the Meiji Era when Japanese began to immigrate to the U.S. At the end of the class, I assign them homework to do research on the conditions in Japan that lead to immigration and provide them with key terms to check as hints for their research. They are also assigned to read the story and research the writer, Toshio Mori.

In the second class, I ask the students to report the results of their research on the Meiji Era. They are also asked to explain the historical terms I assigned the week before. After discussing the economic situation in Japan during the Meiji Era, we move to the subject of immigration and what was happening in the U.S. at that time in history in terms of the common struggles of immigrants to a new country. After establishing the historical background, we are ready to turn to the writer and the story. I ask students for basic biographical information about Toshio Mori. After listening to their responses, I provide additional information about Mori that is relevant to an understanding of the story. In particular, I talk about Mori's experience as a 2nd generation Japanese American in the internment camp in Topaz and the type of stories he wrote. I also give students a handout that includes essential vocabulary and expressions, comprehension questions, and ask students to describe the characters. The students then discuss in their groups their reactions to the story

and answers to the questions I have given them. I then ask students to report what their group has discussed and go over problematic parts of the story (e.g. the flashback element in the story and the difference of experience for the three generations involved in the story). Lastly, I give the students a list of discussion questions as homework for preparation for the next class and a handout for them to write questions they may have about the content of the story and what they would like further explained in the next class.

In the third class, I review the story and have students recall what we discussed in the previous classes. I also collect student questions sheets that I distributed at the end of the previous class and encourage students to consider answers to these questions. We bring up the main points raised in the last class and then the students talk about their responses to the discussion questions. The emphasis in this last class is group discussion of the interpretation of the story and understanding the content on a deeper level. I go from group to group, monitoring their discussions and asking alternative questions as hints to further the discussion. I write these on the board and encourage students to come up with their own questions, modeling my own approach of reading as an active task where we should constantly question what we read. One example is that I ask the students to put themselves in the same situations as the characters and ask them what they would do. We then finish up the story with a discussion of the major themes and I ask the students for their final comments to assess their understanding of the story and its implications in the real world and their own lives.

Method of Evaluation

I evaluated students based on class participation (30%), a midterm exam (30%), and a final exam (40%). Class participation includes completion of homework and actively discussing the material in groups and as a class. Since I want students to have a chance to express their own ideas about the readings, I also give them essay-style questions, which challenge them to respond logically and with some detail. Both the midterm and final exams have two sections: one that is completed in class that tests comprehension of the stories, basic knowledge about literary terms and historical background knowledge they should know from attending class; and the second section is a "take home" test in which they have to choose two questions out of a choice of six or seven questions and write essays as responses. Since the majority of the students have taken at least one required English composition course in their sophomore year, it is reasonable to ask them to write essays in English. In addition, it gives them practice in writing in preparation for the graduation thesis that they will write the following year. Increasing the impact of the final exam on their course grades hopefully serves as an incentive for students to improve their performance by learning from the feedback I provide on the midterm exam and on a continuous basis during each class.

On Student Performance, Level of Interest, and Response to Class

At the end of the term, I had students fill out questionnaires about the class. The readings were evaluated as enjoyable and interesting as they were about an aspect of American history and culture of which students were previously unaware. The readings were short so they were not such a burden to them. However, students tend to underperform (especially in the essay exams) even in the cases when they have participated actively and enthusiastically in class. I found several different difficulties to account for this.

The first problem is the listening English ability of students from the onset. Since I mainly lecture in English, some students cannot fully comprehend what I am saying. Having taught in English language classrooms for over 20 years, I am adept at both paraphrasing and simplifying the language I use as well as speaking both clearly and slowly. In addition, I also provide handouts including most of the information I lectured about in class. Usually I have the better students explain important points in Japanese, and also speak in Japanese on occasion. The former is the preferred method as I can assess how well even the better students understand the content as well as provide aid to those who are struggling with the language of the story itself.

However, students need to work on their listening skills more outside of class as well.

Another problem is that students tend to get caught up in over-using the dictionary and using it whenever they encounter a new word. I remind students that they need to develop their abilities to guess the meaning from context and that not every word is as important as others in regards to understanding general meaning of a sentence. A similar or related problem is that students can often understand the meaning of individual sentences but have trouble understanding the overall content. I have, on occasion, asked students to write down their interpretation of a story in Japanese and found that they could not even express it in their own language well. This problem, to some extent, stems from their weaknesses in their native language and often from the aforementioned lack of reading experience.

In addition, students tend to be hesitant to express themselves and appear used to passively listening to the teacher. However, my approach to the class is very student-centered and requires their active participation in discussion, which is difficult for many. This along with a lack of interest in reading books, and, unfortunately, a lack of awareness of the importance of reading in improving language ability result in a poor attitude towards reading. This is not limited to EFL/ESL students as even native speakers in literature courses will often fall into what Jago calls the "Zone of Minimal Effort" and wait for the teacher to "ultimately explain what it all means" (60). Moreover, I have found that the performance of students tends to vary from year to year and this depended heavily on student attitude toward studying English and how they viewed the importance of improving their own ability in English. Some students appear to be under the mistaken belief that if they are going to become elementary school teachers they only need that level of English ability or they vastly overestimate their own abilities.

Concluding Thoughts and Ideas for the Future

Having taught this course for the past 7 years, I have worked every year to make gradual improvements, looking for new source material especially in order to make the historical background section more appealing. Since I am very aware that students do little reading outside of their assigned textbooks and therefore have little exposure to reading literature, I find that modeling my own thought processes when I read helps to some extent show students that reading is an active process. I also compare reading to being a detective and that readers need to look for the meaning under the surface and have to be vigilant in order to pick up on the hints scattered throughout the literary works. I also believe that I need to challenge my students more into an awareness of their weaknesses so that they may have more motivation to study and to read. To this end, I myself must make time to read and do research so that I can improve my own ability to read, write, and teach. Fostering my own enthusiasm for these pursuits will help me to give more effective classes and to show students the rewards they can reap from reading literature. Lastly, I cannot help but think that the first step is for students to begin reading more in their own language and not just popular fiction or manga but that of the great writers such as Soseki, Tanizaki, and Kawabata. Unless students have quality input, they will not be able to produce meaningful output in either their own language or a foreign one.

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