A Way to Enjoy English Literature Classes

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In typical Japanese English Literature classes, poems or novels are taught in the following way: first, after students read aloud a part of a poem or a novel one by one, they translate it into Japanese. If there are some mistakes in their pronunciation or in the translation, the teacher corrects them and explains the grammar points if necessary. Sometimes the teacher's translation will be given. In that case, students usually try to write it down in their notebooks. After gaining an understanding of the poem or novel, the teacher and sometimes students will make some comments on it. We can say that this is an ordinary literature class in Japan. I sometimes wonder if students are bored with or interested in the class. In this paper, I would like to consider ways to make students enjoy reading poetry in a Japanese university class.

A poem is a work of art which is created from words. The words are arranged in such a way as to create the sound of the poem, which includes harmony and rhythm, and to make readers feel happy, sad, afraid, or some other kind of feeling. Also the poet has something that he/she wants to have readers feel or imagine when reading the poem. As a whole, the purpose of reading poetry is for the reader to enjoy reading and have his or her own interpretation of each poem. With poems, we can interpret what we read by ourselves. This should be the most interesting aspect of reading poems or novels. That is why we continue to enjoy reading the same poem or novels again and again.

Literature is valuable for language learners because they become aware of the formal features of language, use the four skills, and have chance to learn the cultural differences. As Patrick Rosenkjar (2006) points out, "awareness of how language is used to create meaning and knowledge of cultural differences also contribute to the more general educational goals of the liberal arts" (p. 119).

In order to make students participate positively in literature class, we can use task-based instruction. James F. Lee (2000) says that "a task is (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has (a) an objective attainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange; (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of workplans" (p. 32).

Here we should recognize the differences between nonliterary and literary texts.
Nonliterary texts are referential texts, such as scientific reports, college textbooks, time tables, non-fiction books and so on. The purpose of these texts is to convey information. We can paraphrase them. On the other hand, literary texts are representational texts, such as poems, short stories, novels, plays and so on. The purpose of these texts is to express the author’s states of mind, or events in a unique linguistic form. Therefore, we do not paraphrase them but rather interpret what the poem, for example, represents.

Interpretation of a poem requires the combinations of form-focused objective language competence and meaning-focused competence because the main purpose of reading poetry for students is to have their own interpretation of the poem. First, they need to understand what the words in the poem mean. As I wrote above, a poem is a work of art created from words, which have meaning and emotion or feeling. The meaning of a poem is partly what the words mean in the usual sense. Unless readers understand the meaning of the words of a poem, it is impossible for them to have their own interpretation, for the words, which work together, allow readers to feel and create their own interpretation. So I would like to offer task-based instruction as a way to teach poetry. Rosenkjar (2006) says, “the tasks are simultaneously both form- and meaning-focused, thus enabling students to discover the evidence upon which to base interpretations of a text. This frees them from the arbitrary imposition of others’ authoritative interpretations. Students’ critical faculties, therefore, are sharpened as they explore the linguistic form and the meaning of a poem for themselves, and they come to notice not just what a text says but how it creates meaning” (p. 120).

Task-based instruction of poetry will be employed in a class of junior and senior Japanese college students whose English level is intermediate and I will try to have them read poetry through task-based instruction. The goals of the class are for the students to enjoy reading poetry and have their own interpretation of poetry and at the same time, master the four English language skills. The lesson plan consists of three phases: pre-reading activities which introduce new vocabulary and prepare students to read a poem, reading activities which include stylistic-based activities; and post-reading activities which motivate students to get involved in the poem using other skills. From this lesson, I would like to choose the poem “My Fairy” written by Lewis Carroll (1832–98) when he was thirteen years old. This is the first poem in his collection Useful and Instructive Poetry, which was his first booklet. Cohen (1995) explains it as follows: “it consists of sixteen items on the right-hand pages and crude illustrations on the left” (p. 12). He also expresses his astonishment that “he [Carroll] dispatches conventional and ponderous Victorian concerns with a fresh and light stroke, with banter, irreverently but endearing spoofing solemn rubrics” (p. 13).
MY FAIRY

I HAVE a fairy by my side
    Which says I must not sleep,
When once in pain I loudly cried
    It said “You must not weep.”

If, full of mirth, I smile and grin,
    It says “You must not laugh”;
When once I wished to drink some gin
    It said “You must not quaff.”

When once a meal I wished to taste
    It said “You must not bite”;
When to the wars I sent in haste
    It said “You must not fight.”

“What may I do?” at length I cried,
    Tired of the painful task.
The fairy quietly replied,
    And said “You must not ask.”

Moral: “You mustn’t”

(The Complete Works of Lewis Carroll, p. 700)

The pre-reading activities for “My Fairy” are as follows:

Activity 1: Do you believe in fairies? What do you think do fairies do? What image do you have of fairies? Discuss these questions with your partners.

Activity 2: What do you know about the social rules of the Victorian era? How were children brought up at that time? List up how children were expected to behave at that time and then talk about it with your partners.

The two pre-reading activities are task based, involving the need to produce lists of ideas of fairies and the rules that children in the Victorian era had to obey. The goal is to prepare students to read the poem by making sure they know the moral precepts of the Victorian period, which is famous for its high regard for appearances. Of course, children in the middle class had to behave themselves, which means that there were many rules that children had to follow. These activities are followed by literal comprehension activities.
Activity 3: How many stanzas are there in this poem? How many lines are there in each stanza?

Activity 4: What words in stanza 1 rhyme with the following words?

side _________ ; sleep _________

What words in stanza 2 rhyme with the following words?

grin _________ ; laugh _________

What words in stanza 3 rhyme with the following words?

taste _________ ; bite _________

What words in stanza 4 rhyme with the following words?

cried _________ ; task _________

Activity 5: Read the poem with me by saying the lines as I read them. Mark the stressed sounds with an accent mark (‘`). This will show the rhythm of the poem.

The point of activity 3 is to identify the traditional patterns of organization of the poem. Ordinary writing such as prose has paragraphs which help organize ideas. Poems are organized in stanzas, which usually have the same number of lines. Activity 4 shows clearly that the poem has patterns, which are repeated in the poem as rhyme. We have rhyme when the same sound is repeated, usually at the end of lines. Activity 5 helps show students that poems sound like music, which has rhythm and harmony. Sounds are an important element of poems.

Activity 6: a) What kinds of sentence patterns are used in this poem?

b) Each stanza has two sentences. Find the main verb in each sentence and circle it. Then find the verb in each subordinate clause and underline it.

c) What words are repeated in this poem?

Activity 7: a) What relationship do you recognize between verbs in the main clauses and those in the subordinate clauses of each sentence?

cried vs. weep

smile and grin vs. laugh

drink vs. quaff

taste vs. bite

b) In stanza 4, what relationship do you recognize between “cried” and “ask”?
Activities 6 and 7 help students realize that the poet uses some special patterns to convey his message to the reader. "I" says what his "fairy" does to him when he wants to do something. The repeated usage of "must not" shows us that everything that he wants to do is prohibited by the "fairy." In addition, thinking about the words that "I" and the "fairy" use, we can find that the two of them carefully choose the verbs. The verbs have similar meanings, but the nature is quite different. For example, in stanza 2, the verbs "smile and grin" indicate a kind of laughing without sound, on the other hand, "laugh" means a kind of laughing made with the sound of the voice. In short, the "fairy" tries to exaggerate what "I" does or wants to do. We can see the relationship between "cried" and "weep", "drink" and "quaff", and "taste" and "bite." Here the teacher should explain to the students that the poor would drink "gin" in the Victorian era because it was very cheap and easy to get drunk on because of its high alcohol content. So most people in the middle class had never drunk gin. The "fairy" tries to exaggerate or understated what "I" says. In stanza 4, the verb "cried" shows the strong desire of the 'speaker' of the poem. The "fairy" refuses to answer using the verb "ask."

The words of the poem not only have meaning but also feeling. The meaning of poem is partly what the words mean in the real world in the ordinary sense and when the words work together, the poem expresses a feeling.

Activity 8: From activity 7, we know that the words "must not" are repeated in each stanza. What do you think the "fairy" prohibits by using "must not"?

Activity 9: What does the "fairy" symbolize?

Activity 8 helps students understand that the "fairy" prohibits some basic instincts of human beings. "Sleep" and "weep" in stanza 1, "laugh" and "quaff" or "drink" in stanza 2, and "bite" and "fight" in stanza 3 represent basic instincts or desires of human beings.

Now we should assume that the words that make up the poem also have special meanings that need imagination for us to understand. These meanings are indicated by what we call symbols. A symbol is something that has a particular meaning or represents an idea. For example, an image of a Geisha-girl may stand for Japan. So what does the "fairy" symbolize? This poem was written in the Victorian period and the author of this poem, Lewis Carroll, was from the middle class. He was brought up with strict discipline. He must have experienced having been told that he must not do many things. We can conclude that the "fairy" symbolizes the moral or rules of the Victorian period. Activity 9 helps students realize what symbol is used in the poem.
Activity 10: In stanza 1, line 1, the verb “HAVE” is all written in capital letters. Why is this?

Once students have understood the meaning of this poem and the symbol, they can have their own interpretation of this “HAVE.” The poet tries to convey the special connotation for the “fairy” using the all capitalized “HAVE.” We can think about what feeling the poet has for his “fairy.”

Activity 11: What does the word “Moral” in the last line of this poem mean?

It reminds us of Aesop’s Fables, which has a moral at the end of each fable. This poem also has the same pattern as Aesop’s Fables. What does this mean? Does the poet also think that the readers need a moral every time, or is he just trying to make ironical comment on the morals of the Victorian period? It would be interesting to know what the students think about this point. Carroll was only thirteen years old when he wrote this poem. It would also be interesting to think about Lewis Carroll himself, for example, the reason why he would write a nonsense story such as Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865).

Activity 12: Write your own interpretation of this poem.

Activity 12 is the post-reading activity. The main point of this activity is “to induce the students to explore how the poem functions as a whole piece of discourse” and this “involves various aspects of context and viewpoint” (Rosenkjar, 2006, p.126). Here the students can use not only their reading skills but also their writing skills. Moreover, before coming to this stage, they have practiced reading the poem thinking about the rhythm, and they have exchanged their opinions with each other. Now they have to think about their own interpretation in English. The teacher can advise them to give their opinions about the differences in morals between the Victorian period and that of our period, or what message Carroll tried to convey to the readers. Or they can consider if there are some similar elements they can find both in this poem and his nonsense story, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. There must be some common elements or themes that we can see in both works.

To teach a poem using task-based instruction, teachers have to make worksheets beforehand. This is rather time-consuming, but it is very helpful not only for teachers but also for students. Students will understand poetry through reading, listening to, speaking and writing English because they have to exchange their opinions with others, read a poem to understand its meaning, and write their opinions about the poem. They try to make their own interpretation
doing various activities based on task-based instruction. Therefore, they come to understand the poem by themselves through discussion and to enjoy reading poems through doing activities. This is much more effective than just listening to the lecture in class. Once they begin to enjoy reading poems in English, and continue to read them, they might discover their own favorites and enjoy the rhythm or sound structure. The goals of reading poems through task-based instruction is to help students gain the ability to arrive at their own interpretations of the poems, and help them find the pleasure of reading poetry.

Reference