

# Simon Bibby interviews literature specialist Paul Hullah

**Simon Bibby:** Could you tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, how you came to work in Japan?

**Paul Hullah:** Working-class chancer from northern England whose intelligent parents constructively reacted to their own lack of learning by ensuring that their son grew up surrounded by books. Taught at Ripon Grammar School by passionate teachers who steered me towards literature *comme fait accompli*, their shepherd-ing skills replicated by fervent Edinburgh University tutors who directed me through a deconstructionist-feminist PhD ('The Poetry of Christina Rossetti') via an English Literature and Language MA.

I taught Shakespeare tutorials at Edinburgh University, freelanced as a music journalist, then accepted a 'Visiting' Professorship at Okayama National University in 1992: a 'literature teaching' gig which initially was just that but rapidly became a decade-long microcosm of the way literature's place in a curriculum can go from centre-stage hero to shunned bit-part player. The goalposts were shifted via dictums emanating from powerful men who'd never stepped inside a classroom but nevertheless thought they knew how English should best be taught. I pulled up tent pegs and moved through a series of short-term Japanese university EFL posts where literature was tolerated, but not encouraged.

I adapted. I cheated. I found ways to pretend literary texts were 'useful' CLT-wise. I got involved in JALT, became (maybe still am) the 'crazy British bloke that shouts about literature in EFL'. I'd become qualified in TEFL, published internationally by then. I survived. By 2008 I'd devoted sufficient energies to TEFL to realize my true love lay in literature: 'to arrive where

we started and know the place for the first time', as Eliot wrote. Other circumstances, prominent among them being that trying to get tenure at a national university was like extracting blood from stones, necessitated a life/career change. I applied for and was appointed to my current tenured position, Associate Professor of British Poetry at Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo.

**SB:** Tell us about your teaching situation: how does literature feature in your classes?

**PH:** I'm fortunate to be employed in the Literature Faculty of a university that respects intellectual endeavor and teaching that instills active modes of critical thinking in students as well as improving English skills. I'm free to teach literature in all my classes, specifically British poetry, for that's my job. In all my previous positions in Japan, though, I found myself having to apologise for bringing 'literary' writings into the classroom, ended up smuggling poetry in 'Trojan horse' style, being evasive in staff meetings and pretending these wonderfully provocative writings were primarily included to stimulate 'communicative' competence. In reality, I was asking students to *think*, actively engage, develop life skills, *grow*. Those were the 'tasks' I based my teaching on, not booking hotel rooms or buying a packet of fags.

**SB:** You run the annual literature conference Liberlit. Can you tell us about Liberlit?

**PH:** My colleague Mike Pronko and I held the inaugural Liberlit conference in 2010, driven by a sense of despair at the way literary materials are increasingly overlooked, even spurned as a resource for English teachers in Japan. Literary texts are vanishing from textbooks and curricula;

that's depressing, distressing. We know scores of teachers who feel the same way, so we decided to make a stand against the hostile rising tide. Liberlit's a forum for teachers who believe literature has an essential place in any English curriculum.

**SB:** Is Liberlit for EFL teachers, then? Can literature advocates and CLT devotees blissfully co-exist?

**PH:** EFL's a big umbrella and we're all just trying to stay out of the rain. No need to fret. There's plenty of room. Bridges can be built. Whether Liberlit attendees see themselves primarily as EFL teachers or not, they (we) are concurrently interested in supra-linguistic aspects to learning that are crucial to maintenance of constantly and properly socially-engaged, intellectually-stimulated, maturing minds. This function is not fulfilled by one- or two-dimensional 'language learning' texts whose *modus operandi* is mechanically to reiterate fixed grammatical patterns and stolidly enumerate categorized vocabulary items.

**SB:** So you'd object to claims that literature's irrelevant to student needs?

**PH:** Learners are persons, not machines. There may be as many goals as there are different learners, and this is how it should be. But these goals can usefully be separated into two (overlapping) categories. Some learners want to improve their communicative English for 'practical' purposes; others wish to deepen their knowledge of non-domestic culture, ideas, the arts, areas better explored in English, the L1 of these fields. Qualified, experienced, effective EFL teachers are best equipped to serve learners from the former group; teachers competent and skilled in teaching humanities-based literatures and critical thinking skills are more appropriate to the latter. We must accept this spectrum, work with it. In calling ourselves teachers of EFL and/or literary studies, we are. We should respect learners' sundry goals by admitting that we teachers too have different goals, and cooperating with teachers with objectives other to ours. Both sets of teachers have a place. Both are necessary.

**SB:** But why literature in particular, as opposed to other content-based areas: politics or history, for instance?

**PH:** The birth of the study of 'secular' literature in Britain coincided with the rise of romanti-

cism in the early 1800s. This is no coincidence. Pre-Darwinian geological and anthropological ideas disseminated at that time, negating literal authority of biblical doctrine, whilst not denying its allegorical efficacy. Romantic poets were arguably the first gang of writers to have their own manifesto. As well as foregrounding imagination and emotion and supporting universal equality, they embraced *uncertainty*, eschewing didactic dogma. Scholars were saying, we can no longer pretend the Bible answers all our questions; we have to look elsewhere. They looked to literature for new maps by which to script order from chaos, meanings from mayhem, at that revolutionary historical juncture, when everything was changing so fast. 200 years later, our broken world's rudderless. We need maps to find meaning in our lives more than ever before. They are under our noses. Literary works are *timeless*, addressing fears, feelings, *questions* people have in 2012 just as in 1812.

**SB:** Yet isn't most literature simply 'too hard' for Japanese students? Do they have sufficient vocabulary to deal with literary texts?

**PH:** Confidently to engage with, explicate, or discuss a literary text in English, a student will require a certain competence. But that's a *prerequisite* to literary study rather than what we primarily seek to teach. A good curriculum will ensure that courses are in place so students have appropriate basics under their belt—competence in reading, writing, and expressing opinions clearly—*before* they arrive at literary study proper. A student will learn many new vocabulary items from reading Tennyson's 'Ulysses' but that's not my prime aim in using that text in my class. If students come to me desiring to improve their TOEFL/TOEIC score, I will gladly point them towards courses designed to do just that: courses specifically designed and paced to build up and consolidate appropriately-graded chunks of vocabulary and classified, calibrated grammatical patterns, answering techniques, test-taking strategies and so on. But if a student comes to me wanting to learn about life, art, culture, history, philosophy, society, and how these affect and *effect* ways in which people feel and think, then I will throw my door open to that student and pull down a book of poems from my shelf.

**SB:** What do you say to students who are having difficulties understanding?

**PH:** I tell them a poem is like an abstract painting: suggestively inviting our participation to construct meaningful encodings of its deliberately non-didactic content and provocative language and images. I tell them, 'Consult a Japanese translation if it helps you!' The sooner they can get into and connect with the text the better; then they can start exporting themes and ideas and processing them. I tell them not to worry, but to summon what Keats called 'Negative Capability'—the ability to know that there are aspects in everything we cannot fully comprehend and that we must not let this imperfect understanding be cause for unease or despair. Why? Because life is like that! In this elemental way, what we define as 'literary MIRRORS life. If you spend your life craving 100% understanding of everything in it, you'll have a miserable existence and likely go insane. You have to let it go. You have to abandon the quest for the perfect masterpiece and settle for the imperfect masterpieces that remain. Only then can you be content. Reading's like that too. We should read books as we read life. We can't expect to understand everything, nor should we, or that would be the end of things. Literature, like life, isn't a solvable scientific equation; it's an abstract work they can imagine into meaning, focusing on parts that communicate with them and, if necessary, ignoring bits they don't like or don't 'get'. This empowers them, puts them in control, leaves them no longer feeling guilty about having less than perfect comprehension. They need that negative capability. They need to stop striving for perfection.

**SB:** But what about effective assessment?

**PH:** Accountable, something you can back up if someone questions a grade? I prefer the CSE evaluation method: Common Sense based on Experience. It's never failed me as a reliable indicator of intelligence, of how 'good' a student is, how well that human being will deal with 'the real world'. In that respect, TOEFL/TOEIC have failed me miserably and often. And if students want actively to question grades they've received? Great! Bring them in.

**SB:** But if there's only holistic evaluation at the teacher's discretion, how do students know what targets to aim for?

**PH:** The goal is to make meaningful connections with a text and be able to express that meaning clearly, critically, originally. The goal should never be to get a certain test score. Grading *has* to

be holistic: students begin from different starting points, so we have to trust ourselves to be able to assess progress they've made sensitively and with respect to them as individuals. We have to trust them to be able to accept that. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to be able to evaluate how much a person's critical thinking has matured or not over time. You talk to them, listen to them, and it becomes clear. It's called *communicating*. It's realer and more reliable than TOEFL/TOEIC scores, which are just measures of how well you can take a TOEFL/TOEIC test and no marker of cognition or original thought. A Polish proverb says, 'Weighing a pig a hundred times won't make him any fatter.'

**SB:** So you think that 'literature' best facilitates this process?

**PH:** Literary texts reveal the opposite side of a coin with which Japanese learners are familiar, demonstrating that there is no single consummate answer to every question. This 'eureka' moment is psychologically liberating, freeing the mind into heightened learning mode. There's data and research, qualitative and quantitative, confirming this efficacy of literary texts taught in English: Raymond A. Mar, Ron Carter, Zawiah Yahya. Choice and creativity are remedial, curative, motivating. And anything can be a 'literary text' if it uses language, words, images, in ways allowing for interpretation beyond the literal. It's all in the presentation; provenance is irrelevant. If it makes my students think in mature critical ways, I don't care if a passage was penned by Shakespeare or the bloke who cleans the toilets. There's no exclusivity, no obligation to 'authenticity'. What's 'authenticity' anyway? Everything's authentic. Everything comes from somewhere.

**SB:** Can you suggest specific texts for less able students?

**PH:** For those nervous of 'poetry proper', certain modern pop song lyrics seem to me an appropriate resource. They fit well our fluid definition of a 'literary' text. They tend to use language (words, images, sounds, poetic devices such as irony, punning, alliteration etc.) in suggestive, creative ways that we find more thought provoking than dogmatic, more open than closed. They tend to raise questions as much as attempt to answer them. And they tend to be lexically straightforward, more so than older texts full of archaic expressions that take time to explicate. Those older texts are usable, with patience, but

with modern works you can more quickly cut to the chase, the chase being the reader's response and construction of meanings.

**SB:** You don't think we need to restrict ourselves to the established literary 'canon' then?

**PH:** The 'established canon' is full of texts with unproblematic vocabulary and grammar. There are countless instances of writing, phrased in lexis neither difficult nor old, that can, to borrow Heaney's analogy, move us more than heat or cold. There's loads of Tennyson and Wordsworth you can use. Christina Rossetti. Blake, Yeats. Philip Larkin, even Eliot. Actually, I can't think of a single author post-1800 who *didn't* write at least some stuff that's grammatically and lexically straightforward. Can you? Anyway, as I said before, 'it's not what you teach, it's the way that you teach it'. Wasn't there a song called that?

**SB:** Okay, the \$64,000 question: what about curriculum planning?

**PH:** It's about confidence followed by choice. Ideally, a curriculum's constituent parts should combine to nurture students to a point where they feel empowered enough to make confident choices regarding the direction of their own learning, providing options from which they can select once that power to choose is properly instilled. In terms of an English curriculum, this will mean a systematic building up of the 4 skills, with skills ideally used together and not in isolation—so 'Debate', rather than 'Speaking' in this room and 'Listening' next door—followed by a gradually-integrated second tier of varied content-based courses. That's the sort of curriculum we have at MGU. It works. But teachers are important too. You must have good teachers.

**SB:** What methodology do you yourself use? How do you teach? What's your classroom like?

**PH:** I use the Hullavian Method. I'm an educator, not an entertainer. You don't need bells, whistles, or trendy techno-makeovers when what you're teaching has timeless themes, resonating depth, universally-connective substance, multiple possible applications and interpretations. There's no need to dress up literature. It speaks for itself. I don't need a salesman's skills; what I'm pushing sells itself. That's why it's recorded. That's why it endures.

**SB:** Anything else to add?

**PH:** I suppose that, sweetest of all, literature does no harm. How could it? Alone, as Auden said, poetry *makes* nothing happen. Literature is blameless. It invites *us* to decide. When he was asked to defend 'dangerous, delinquent' rock and roll in 1956, Elvis Presley said, 'It frees something in us, lets it loose. I don't know what it is, but I know it don't hurt nobody.' Literature and the responses it invites 'don't hurt nobody' either. Literature frees us to find ourselves; it lets us loose. We're all searchers, as it should be. The more we look, the more we can hope to find. And I know no better window through which to view the wounded world than literature, and no better mirror in which to examine ourselves.

**SB:** Thank you for the interview Paul.

**Simon Bibby** started up the new JALT SIG Literature in Language Teaching at the end of 2011 to promote and encourage the use of literature in the language classroom. Having originally qualified as a high school teacher, Simon has an MA in Educational Technology and TESOL from the University of Manchester. He is now studying for his PhD in Applied Linguistics at the University of Swansea, in their renowned Vocabulary Acquisition Research Group. He works at The Language Center, Kwansai Gakuin University. He can be contacted at <bibbysimon@gmail.com>.



Former Miyazaki JALT Chapter President **Paul Hullah** currently teaches at Meiji Gakuin University in Tokyo. A notoriously vocal campaigner for the use of literature in English teaching, he is co-founder of Liberlit, an organization for 'Discussion and Defense of the Role of 'Literary' Texts in the English Curriculum' <www.liberlit.com>. He is himself a prolific author: *Rock UK*, a socio-cultural history of British rock music in textbook form, was published this year by Cengage Learning, and his fifth collection of poetry, *Homing*, was published in the UK in 2011 by Word Power Books. He can be contacted at <paulhullah@hotmail.com>.

