

From Theory to Practice: Reading EAP Literature Using Critical Theory

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Teachers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classes in Japanese universities often use authentic English literature to develop students' reading skills, but the cultural contexts found in such literature can, if left unpacked, create comprehension problems, unsettling even proficient language learners. For Japanese students to attain a broader comprehension of authentic literary texts, acquiring a deeper knowledge of the cultural discourses that underpin English literature is important. I taught mediated literary critical theory to a group of sophomore EAP literature students at a university in Tokyo and in this paper I illustrate how I used simplified Marxist criticism to scaffold students' learning by emphasizing and recycling key vocabulary as well as using Internet resources. I also describe how students applied critical theory reading skills to a short story, and I finish with a summary of student reactions to the course.

日本の大学のEAPクラスでは、学生の読解力を向上させるために英文学をよく利用している。しかしながら、例え英語力の高い学生でさえ、文学の中に存在する文化を理解する問題に直面する。日本の学生が英文学を理解するためには、その裏に隠されている文化を理解する事がとても重要である。この論文は、東京のある大学の2年生のEAP英文学のグループに英文学の批評理論を教えているコースについて紹介する。論文ではウェブサイト2.0のインターネット技術を利用して、どの様に英文学の中の鍵となる単語を教えているかを説明する。また学生がいかにこれらの批評理論を応用して、短編集を読むときに利用したかを述べる。最後に、このコースに対する学生の反応について説明する。

IN AN age when a growing number of Japanese students are looking for ways to improve their knowledge of foreign cultures, authentic literature would appear to be a valuable pedagogical tool. Literature is a product of, and a negotiated response to, specific cultural communities and time periods, acting as a potential liminal bridge to wider cultural awareness. Yet the culture that underpins literature can also erect a series of barriers that limit students' understanding and stymie their personal engagement. A lack of knowledge of Western culture may cause comprehension problems for even advanced students (Kramsch, 1993). This problem is compounded by the fact that in many Japanese universities, EAP reading students, such as literature majors, are often exclusively taught classical rather than contemporary, or indeed global, English literature. Many modern literature textbooks used in tertiary education in Japan reflect this. One such example is the popular reading textbook series *Discovering Fiction* (Kay & Gelshenen, 2001), which allocates space for a large selection of canonized American writers, such as Kate Chopin, James Thurber, and O. Henry, yet excludes more recent English literature selections that might be more relevant to students' lives.

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Moreover, the cultural information that underpins such classic literature is often glossed over. Instead, literary texts are often used in English classes for developing intensive reading skills, for grammar translation, and for information retrieval purposes (Culler, 1975).

It is regrettable if Japanese EAP reading students fail to acquire the basic cultural skills necessary to fully understand English literary texts. Engaging with an authentic text allows students to gradually develop a richer awareness of the rules that underpin foreign countries (Collie & Slater, 1987). Equipping students with authentic sociocultural awareness is important for achieving greater fluency and wider competence (Buttjes, 1990). Exporting and teaching cultural values, however, can aid in this endeavour yet also mask the way in which power establishes and reinforces itself (Foucault, 1980), and there are concerns that students imbibing Western culture will be encouraged to “analyse and evaluate the world as made and seen by Europeans” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 241). Because of this, some teachers may be concerned that, by introducing Western writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens, or J. K. Rowling into a reading class, they are acting as ideological Trojan horses and contributing to cultural imperialism. It is important, therefore, that Japanese students reading literature in EAP classrooms should be encouraged to interact with the culture underpinning such narratives at a more theoretical and critical level.

Definition of Critical Theory

Pursuing such an approach towards reading literature could involve the introduction of literary critical theory, as this provides readers with tools that can “show us our world and ourselves through new and valuable lenses” (Tyson, 2006, p. 3). Critical theory, which includes Marxist, feminist, and postcolonialist approaches, offers a set of critical viewpoints that can be used when reading a literary narrative to question its ideological values and also cast light on issues such as cultural representation. A literary narrative can be seen as a representative part of the culture in which it is placed, containing

ideologies that underpin society and support the powerful through selection and endorsement. Foucault (1981) noted, for example, how the Age of Reason suppressed what was considered *unreason*, depicting it as something to be contained and imprisoned. Thus literature written during the Enlightenment can be seen as representative of a discourse that promoted reason and excluded madness. Pennycook (1998) observed how the same period also created an ontological division between the colonial discourse of Western *self* and the colonized discourse of Eastern *other*, and literary works such as Defoe’s 1719 *Robinson Crusoe*, and Swift’s 1726 *Gulliver’s Travels* can arguably be seen as reflecting a Western superior attitude while depicting other parts of the world as inferior. Yet even contemporary novels such as Garland’s 1996 *The Beach* can still be argued to contain these discourses. A critical theory approach would therefore seek to equip Japanese EAP students with a deeper, more critical knowledge of the ideological discourses contained within textual narratives.

Purpose of this Paper

In this paper I will describe how I taught mediated literary critical theory to L2 reading students in a Japanese university class in order to improve their overall engagement with and knowledge of authentic literary texts. My main objective was to lead students to see that literary narratives have competing discourses and positions at play, and can thus be read in different critical ways. I hoped that critical theory would enhance students’ responses to texts, allowing them to better inhabit the narratives they were reading, and to compare foreign literary discourses with their own lives and culture more dynamically. The concept of introducing such a highly theoretical approach to reading presented me with a challenge. Literary critical theory can be “difficult to define” (Tallack, 1995, p. 7), and its complex theoretical jargon can be somewhat intimidating. Even seasoned practitioners and teachers of critical theory acknowledge that it can often create a great deal of “anxiety” (Tyson, 2006, p. 1)

for those attempting to understand it. Introducing some of the central conceptual ideas of critical theory to my students thus required a teaching method that crystallized important theoretical terms and language without oversimplifying or undermining the benefits of critical theory.

Method Students

I introduced critical theory to an English literature class in the second semester of 2013. The 24 students were all 2nd-year EAP reading students. Classes are divided according to TOEFL test results and the students in the study were in classes listed as “middle level,” having achieved an average score of 427 on the TOEFL test. The purpose of the EAP sophomore reading class was to prepare students for their major field of study (in either literature or linguistics) in their 3rd and 4th years. Crucially, all 24 of the students in this study had already studied some authentic literature, such as English short stories, during their freshman reading course. Although the students’ previous literature study had largely focused on reading for information purposes, such as gap-fill activities and answering basic questions, I felt that their brief exposure to authentic literature would help them with the more challenging demands of the sophomore course.

Texts

As part of their study requirements for the second semester, the students were required to read several short stories from the university mandated textbook *Discovering Fiction 2* (Kay & Gelsheney, 2001). The students were required to apply special critical theory readings to *Thank You, Ma’m* (1958/2001) by Langston Hughes and *Desiree’s Baby* (1893/2001) by Kate Chopin. The students were also encouraged to apply critical theory to the short story *Dead Men’s Path* (1953/1973) by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, which I distributed as a photocopied handout.

The three texts were chosen in order to have variety in terms of author gender, nationality, race, and class position. Although two of the authors were American, their racial backgrounds, class positions, and geographic locations were different, meaning their texts contained different and contrasting types of discourse. Chopin’s late 19th century narrative *Desiree’s Baby* is set on a Louisiana plantation and features a female protagonist called Desiree who is alienated by her husband because of her suspected mixed race. Yet the story’s denouement reveals that their newborn baby’s dark skin is inherited from Desiree’s husband. *Thank You, Ma’m* is set in an American city during the first half of the 20th century. Urban poverty causes Roger, the central teenage character, to attempt theft, bringing him into contact with Mrs. Jones, who shows him kindness and understanding. In Achebe’s *Dead Men’s Path*, set in a British-run school in Nigeria in the 1950s, the problems of British Christian missionaries in Africa are presented from a Nigerian perspective. The headmaster of the school treats the customs of the Nigerian villagers with contempt, leading to tribal warfare. After reading these three short stories, the students were introduced to several simplified critical theories and were expected to apply this information when discussing and writing about the texts.

Critical Theories

I taught the students about three of the major schools of critical theory: Marxist, feminist, and postcolonialist. A Marxist approach to literature examines the social class of the characters and the social conflict between them. It also discusses which characters benefit and which characters are exploited or alienated because of such social conflicts. Such analysis can also search for economic metaphors (textual images, language, events, and objects) for clues as to whether literature reinforces capitalist culture or subverts it. A feminist approach to literature can be used to examine the gender roles of the characters in a text, the divisions and conflicts between them, and whether or not the message of a text reinforces mascu-

line hegemony and alienates women. It can also examine whether characters' gender roles are natural or shaped by cultural discourse. A postcolonial approach to literature examines how cultural and national differences between characters are represented and whether or not texts depict characters from different cultural backgrounds as "other" through stereotyping or racism. Postcolonial theory thus is used to analyse whether a text reinforces colonial culture or tries to subvert it.

Handouts

I prepared handouts for the students (see Appendix A) in an attempt to scaffold and simplify the critical theory-centered ideas taught in the course. This simplified approach was based on a model provided by Sellnow (2009) in her book *The Rhetorical Power of Popular Culture*. This book scaffolds a Marxist and feminist critical approach towards analyzing discourses underpinning contemporary popular media culture through simplified reading activities and discussion questions. I further modified her ideas for my L2 reading students. For example, I introduced postcolonial criticism by distributing simplified readings containing some of the basic ideas and figures from colonial and postcolonial criticism, such as Mohandas Gandhi, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said. I also included vocabulary that outlined postcolonial critical theory. Feminism was similarly introduced through handouts that explicated ideas by feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and Naomi Wolf. The handouts also contained short comparative examples of similar literary sentences that the students were encouraged to analyse using critical theory. For example, students were given a feminism handout that encouraged them to compare a sentence from the original version of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847/2006) with an almost identical line from the *Jane Eyre* graded reader (Attwood, 2010). The original text contains Brontë's famously empowering feminist line "Reader, I married him" (p. 517), yet the graded reader version of this sentence appears to weaken and dilute its power, rendering it

a meeker "I married Mr. Rochester very quietly" (Attwood, 2010, p. 151). Students discussed which sentence appeared to reinforce male culture and which example appeared to subvert it.

The vocabulary approach used in the handouts was influenced by Byram, Gribkova, and Starkey's (2001) critical and cross-cultural comparative approach that advocates the use of key terms to widen simple teaching texts and promote broader, more critical discussion about culture. This includes emphasizing and recycling words such as "human rights; equality; dignity; gender; bias; prejudice; stereotype; racism; ethnic minority" (Byram et al, 2001, p. 16) in relation to textbook subjects such as education and sports. In this study, however, such an approach was used in relation to themes contained within authentic English literature. When I distributed simplified critical theory reading information to the students, I highlighted specific vocabulary with simplified synonym definitions and explanations of technical jargon. To maximize student opportunities for memorization, this key vocabulary was also recycled in subsequent classes, as advocated by Nation (2001), in the form of gap-fill reading exercises and discussion questions.

Audiovisuals

As audiovisuals can stimulate language students' interest in the acquisition of cultural content (Rivers, 1981), I used short video clips from YouTube, with accompanying worksheets, to complement the critical theory taught in class. For example, video clips from the short documentary movie *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ko_N4BcalPY), were used to explicate postcolonial critical theory, and reinforced by handouts that summarized some of the key ideas in the video.

Procedure

Three critical theories were introduced over the course of the semester, and this section will focus in particular on how Marxist criticism

was taught and applied to a literary text. Marxist theory tends to view literature as something that is created as the result of cultural conditioning. Literary narratives can be used to either reinforce and naturalize the ideas of the rich and powerful capitalist class or instead to subvert and critique such capitalist hegemony. I distributed simplified reading handouts (see Appendix A) that gave a mediated overview of some of the basic ideas of Karl Marx's *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* (1867/1976) and then outlined how these socio-economic ideas were directed more specifically towards a critique of culture (such as literature) by using Gramsci's *Selections From the Prison Notebooks* (1971). These reading handouts included terms such as *alienation*, *capitalism*, *class division*, *bourgeoisie*, *exploitation*, *proletariat*, *economic metaphor*, and *hegemony* and explained how a piece of culture or literature can be seen as repressive or nonrepressive by the way it reinforces or subverts capitalist hegemony. Some of the more difficult terms and theoretical jargon were highlighted in a word box at the bottom of the page, which included simplified explanations (see Appendix A). After having done the readings, students were shown a short YouTube musical animation by Gastón Viñas (2006) entitled *Radiohead - 2 + 2 = 5* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lstDdzedgcE>). In the animated music video, loosely based on Orwell's *1984*, a group of pigs gradually pacify, exploit, and finally force-milk cows by presenting them with television sets. I gave the students a number of postviewing questions that highlighted the vocabulary they had learned and then asked them to identify which animals represented the bourgeoisie capitalist class and the proletariat worker class, which group was exploited, whether any economic metaphors were employed and, in their opinion, whether the animation supported or critiqued capitalist hegemony.

Following this exercise, I gave the students a practical example of how these ideas can be applied to the real world by showing a short series of YouTube clips from a documentary about Western brands such as Gap, Nike, and Adidas operating sweatshop factories in Indonesia (*John Pilger-The new rulers of the world*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=prfRL2DUtmXY>). While viewing the documentary

excerpts, students answered gap-fill questions and identified four specific sets of details: working hours, factory temperatures, and daily salaries. Students were then given the same Marxist questions they had used to discuss the *Radiohead - 2 + 2 = 5* animation and identified the proletariat worker class and the bourgeoisie capitalist class, discussed class division in terms of who was being exploited and who was benefiting, and finally debated whether this documentary reinforced or subverted capitalist hegemony.

The students had previously read the short story *Thank You, Ma'm* (Hughes, 1958/2001) and had done post reading information retrieval tasks and comprehension quizzes. In the story, Roger, the central character, attempts to steal from Mrs. Jones so he can purchase a pair of blue suede shoes he had seen advertised. The text can be given a Marxist reading and used to document how capitalist culture exploits people and leads them astray. The students analyzed and evaluated the text by answering questions keyed to the Marxist vocabulary they had been taught. During this critical discussion process the students discussed issues of class and exploitation, economic metaphors, and whether the texts potentially reinforced or subverted capitalist hegemony.

Outcomes

Student Responses to the Texts

After the students had used the critical theory handouts to discuss *Thank You, Ma'm*, I elicited their opinions. Many of the students felt that the characters Roger and Mrs. Jones represented the proletariat worker class and the shoe company represented the bourgeoisie capitalist class that was exploiting them. The blue suede shoes were seen as an economic metaphor, and the story was perceived as subverting capitalist hegemony due to Mrs. Jones' criticism of Roger's behavior in pursuing the shoes. Having applied these concepts towards the story, the students had moved beyond answering basic textbook focus questions. Instead of doing simple information retrieval analysis of characters and events, the students moved

towards a deeper discussion of the sociocultural codes that influenced the behavior of the characters. The students also appeared to develop a more critical awareness of and opinion regarding which messages the text seemed to promote and which messages were excluded.

Student Feedback on the Course

In order to evaluate the students' attitudes towards this teaching approach and its usefulness in reading authentic texts, I asked two postreading questions (see Appendix B). The first question required students to self-assess whether their ability to think critically about literature had improved during the course, and the majority of them said that it had. The second question asked if students' reading comprehension had improved, and again a number of them responded in the affirmative. Additional student comments included observations that "My knowledge about literature expanded," "My idea can expand more and more thanks to these literature and culture [classes]," and "This class gives me new perspective and makes me think about literature and culture of other countries deeply and actively." However, not all the comments were positive. One student commented that "This class is really difficult, so I couldn't understand some topics," illustrating that even though the critical theory had been scaffolded and simplified, it still proved to be too difficult for some.

Conclusions and Future Directions

This brief pilot study shows that a scaffolded approach towards critical theory can be used in a Japanese L2 classroom setting and can arguably prove useful in helping students better understand English literature. However, the students' varied reactions illustrate that there is much work to be done in improving course design and the scaffolding of theory if greater levels of comprehension are to be achieved. Moreover, as no survey was conducted to garner students'

understanding before the course started, there is no base against which to compare their responses at the end of the course. Hence, the limitations of the two questions used in this study, and indeed the students' responses to them, need to be appropriately acknowledged.

Ongoing course design will therefore require a much more rigorous approach, which I hope to address and improve. Noting Showalter's (2003) observations that literature can lead readers to think more critically, in a future project I will require students to compose essays about the texts they read and will include six questions tailored to the six levels of Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). The first three questions will be constructed to test students on lower order cognitive processing skills such as remembering, understanding, and applying, whilst the remaining questions will test students on higher order thinking processes such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. I hope that this more rigorous evaluation of multiple comparative test results will illustrate the effects of such theory on students' ability to answer questions keyed to the higher levels of the revised taxonomy.

Even though critical theory is problematic to teach and objectively measure in L2 literature classes, this should not necessarily prevent EAP reading teachers from introducing mediated forms into the classroom and need not obstruct students from applying it to authentic texts critically and creatively. Encouraging students to more critically engage with literary texts in a university reading course is potentially beneficial in aiding a broader comprehension of English literature and culture.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Sample of Marxism Handout

Karl Marx (1818-1883) argued that all societies involve class struggle, or *class division* between people. This conflict involves an economic struggle between the *bourgeoisie* who control production, and the *proletariat* who does the work and produce the goods. Marx criticized this form of society, which he called *capitalism*, and argued

that workers in a capitalist society suffered from *alienation*. Marx also argued that the bourgeoisie *benefited* from the capitalist system, while the lower class suffered *exploitation* by the upper class.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) later argued that the class division or struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat also involved culture, and further noted that the ruling capitalist class kept its power through cultural *hegemony*. Thus many recent Marxists have argued that cultural hegemony in capitalism involves newspapers, books, magazines, movies and TV programs. For Gramsci, all culture was potentially dangerous, as it could *reinforce* the capitalist power of the rich classes. However, culture could also be used to *subvert* the capitalist power of the rich. A Marxist reading of literature therefore looks for *economic metaphors* that can help us to decide whether a book reinforces or subverts capitalism.

Alienation: In Marxism, a person is alienated if he/she is separated from the results of one's work. For example, a shoemaker suffers alienation if he/she is unable to wear or use the shoes he/she has made.

Benefit: According to Marx, a person benefits if he/she uses more than he/she makes.

Bourgeoisie: A group of people who are from the middle and upper class who own and use the things made by the worker class.

Capitalism: A system where the things made and traded are privately owned and sold for profit.

Class division: A situation where the position between rich and poor is unequal.

Economic metaphor: An image, word, event or object that can help the reader decide whether a work of literature supports capitalist culture or criticizes it.

Exploitation: According to Marx, a person is exploited if he/she makes more than he/she uses.

Hegemony: To have influence or control over a group of people.

Proletariat: The working or wage earning class, who make and produce most of the things used by rich people.

Reinforce: To support or strengthen something.

Subvert: To criticize or weaken something.

Appendix B

Postreading Questions

1. Has your ability to think more critically about literature and culture improved/not improved because of this course?
2. Has your reading comprehension improved/not improved because of this course?