

〈論文〉

Jon Silkin's 'Death of a Son': Poetry in the EFL Classroom

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1 Introduction

In a paper entitled '*Bungaku to Eigo Kyoiku (Literature and English Teaching)*', I discussed the rationale of using literature in general English courses for non-literature majors at Japanese universities and suggested several ways of teaching literary materials (Marukawa 1995). Then in another paper I reported on my three-year teaching practice in using literature in several EFL classes. The actual practice proved the validity of my argument in the first paper that literary materials are worth using in the EFL classroom and that success in using them depends on the choice of materials and the techniques of using them (Marukawa 1998).

The 1998 paper did not, however, cover my whole three-year practice; I did not report on my practice in one class because I thought, as the class was somewhat different from the other classes, it deserved to be taken up separately. The most obvious difference was that the students in this class were English majors, while the students in the others were either Economics majors, or Business Administration majors. Though they may not be particularly interested in literature, English majors are certainly more interested in English and are supposed to be better at the language. English courses for them, therefore, should be organized so as to suit their interests and language ability. For one 1995 class of English majors, I organized one semester general English course entirely consisting of literary materials selected by me, intending to enhance their interest in the language by exposing them to various ways it is used.

This paper is a rather belated report of how the course was organized, what

techniques and methods were used in teaching the materials, and how the students responded to the course. I will not treat in detail every material used, but, after giving a rough outline of the course, I will focus on the lesson on a poem by Jon Silkin (1930-97) because it was a highlight of the whole course and also because poetry had no place in my former report. Though this report will be concluded by repeating the above-mentioned proven argument, it still is worth reporting because, as 'the choice of materials and the techniques of using them' are crucial to success of a course, a variety of techniques and teaching materials should be welcome.

2 The general course description and why English majors should be exposed to literature in English

The official name of the course is 'English 1b', which means nothing specific but that the course is one of the three general English courses required of the freshmen.¹ The teacher can design the course in any way as long as it helps develop students' English proficiency. The English-major class I was assigned to teach consisted of 41 students. One class period was the typical 90-minute one, the class meeting once a week.

I divided the one-year course into two different sessions, in the first of which, namely, the first semester, I used a textbook consisting of essays on aspects of British society and culture and related listening comprehension exercises. The second semester was devoted to literary materials. The reason why I planned the two semesters differently, when it was a usual practice to use one textbook throughout the year, was simple—not to let the course become stale and boring.

Then, why literature? English majors should be sensitized to ways how the English language works, and literature offers texts where students can come across varieties of English and see the language in action in various ways. As Brumfit and Carter say, 'literary text is almost the only "context" where different varieties of language can be mixed and still admitted' (1986, 6) and where language resources are often 'used to the full' (*ibid.* 15). Though the textbook used in the first semester was helpful in evoking interest in Britain, its language was not of the kind that would lead the reader to look at it carefully. This is natural, since the main purpose of this kind of informational, or non-literary, text is to give information and not to attract the

reader's attention to the language itself. On the other hand, the reader of a literary text is necessarily sensitized to its language whose resources are fully exploited in the text. Sensitive response to language is an ability that should be developed in a language learner who wants to attain an advanced level.

Formerly the university curriculum for English majors used to include a great deal of literature. This is not always the case now. English majors at my university can choose to complete their curriculum without reading much literature in English. Not a few of them believe that, since literature has no practical use in everyday life, they don't have to read literature in order to be a better user of English. Such being the case, one semester course consisting entirely of literary materials would be a precious occasion for them to be exposed to a little of the versatility and infinite variety of the English language.

Besides developing sensitive response to language, literature can promote active participation in class activities and improve students' motivation. This is what I emphasized in the 1995 paper as a rationale for using literature in English classes for non-literature majors. It applies to English majors as well.

3 The course organization and how it worked

With the reasons described in the previous section in mind, I chose poems and short stories for the 1995 second-semester English 1b course. I did not include novels or dramas because I thought long texts would frighten the freshmen who had no experience of extensive reading and also because I wanted them to find satisfaction in reading through whole works of literature, however short they might be. Instead of letting the students read a jumble of works, I selected works that had the theme of love in common, which should be a theme of absorbing interest for young people. Then I arranged the materials roughly in the order of easiness of English as follows.

Class period	Materials to be used
1 (Sept. 14)	A mini-text by Leszek Szkutnik 'One Perfect Rose' by Dorothy Parker 'Flowers' by Wendy Cope

2, 3 (Sept. 21 & 28)	'A Very Short Story' by Ernest Hemingway
4, 5, 6, 7 (Oct. 5 through 26)	'The Lost Phoebe' by Theodore Dreiser
8, 9, 10 (Nov. 2 through 16)	'Lispeth' by Rudyard Kipling
11, 12 (Nov. 30 & Dec. 7)	'Death of a Son' by Jon Silkin
13 (Jan. 11)	'Summum Bonum' by Robert Browning
14 (Jan. 18)	Final examination

The actual assignment of materials to the periods was not so clear-cut; it usually happened that one material ran on into the period assigned to another material. Almost every class began with a feedback on the worksheets or homework handed in at the last period. About half of classroom activities were done in groups of four.

In the following several sections, I give a brief description of each material, the activities done on the material, and the students' response to it.

3.1 The mini-text and two poems

The first class period was planned as an introduction to the theme of love as well as to the new ways of teaching including creative work and group activities.² In order to help the students make a 'soft landing', I chose a very easy text called 'a mini-text' as the first material from a resource book (Maley 1994). A mini-text is a very short text with a little more or less than fifty words. Though its language is simple, the feelings and ideas it expresses are 'often intense and profound' (*ibid.* 25). The text taken up is one of the mini-texts written by Leszek Szutnik, a Polish textbook writer, which is given as a sample text in Maley's section on mini-texts. It tells of unrequited love in such simple language leaving a lot of things unsaid that it would allow the reader to fill in or expand freely.

My lesson plan depended largely on the set of activities suggested by Maley. He presents the sample text with a number of possible activities classified in twelve categories of procedure such as expansion, reduction, comparison/contrast, analysis, etc. The two poems listed in the table above are included as material for comparison/contrast, because they have themes similar to that of the mini-text. I adopted eight of the suggested activities to be done in class and as homework.

The students seemed to enjoy group activities, but at the same time, they seemed

to be a little puzzled. For one thing they were too busy, a new activity coming after another; for another, they had difficulty in understanding the poems, because they were not used to formal conventions of poetry such as run-on lines and inversion. The first lesson did not turn out to be so soft a landing as intended.

3.2 'A Very Short Story'

I chose this story because of its plain English and compact drama. The two-period lesson followed the lesson plan sketched in my 1995 paper (Marukawa 1995, 208). First I handed out the first four paragraphs photocopied to the students and let them guess what *they*, *he*, and *Luz* in the first paragraph were, how they were related to each other, and whether *he* and *Luz* would finally get married. After some period of silent reading, heated guessing went on in the groups. When each group came to its own conclusion, the second half of the text was handed out. The rest of the story was read with increased interest because of the anticipation. The second lesson was devoted to individual rewriting of *Luz*'s letter in the reported speech into the direct speech and working out the chronology of the events of the story.

The two-period lesson cannot be deemed unsuccessful because the students actively participated in class activities, and in the term-end questionnaire, eleven of them counted the story as a work they liked. This is partly due to the shortness of the story, which two of the students gave as their reason for liking the story. The slower pace of the lesson may also have helped many slow readers among the students.

3.3 'The Lost Phoebe'

The text chosen is an adapted version of the story for ESL/EFL students (Draper 1994). It is a story of a rustic dotard who wanders in the countryside to look for his dead wife and finally dies happily in a hallucination that he is reunited with his young wife. Though it is long with more than 4000 words, I thought it would be accessible to the students because it is written at the 1500-word level. The story is divided into three parts, with a set of comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary exercises given to each part, and a discussion and writing activity to the last part. I adopted most of the exercises, adding some exercises of my own devising and set the writing activity as an optional work. Due to the amount of reading and exercises, the work was done

mostly on an individual basis.

Many of the students seemed to be daunted by the amount of reading and exercises; only one third of them, *i.e.* fourteen students, completed the three sets of answers. Nevertheless, nineteen students answered they liked the story, and four of them found it very moving.

3.4 'Lispeth'

This story takes place in the colonial India and treats the racial prejudice and hypocrisy of the English colonialists who make light of and even mock the passionate love of a proud Indian girl for an Englishman. It is shorter by half than the Dreiser story. I let the students read the original version with the notes prepared by me. Since some knowledge about India is indispensable in understanding the story, I began the three-period lesson by giving the students a simple pre-reading quiz on India; its geography, population, languages, religions, and recent history.

While-and post-reading activities included such activities as grammar exercises, discussion about the relevance of the story to the present-day Japan, and grid-filling to analyze the situation of the heroine who is suspended between her Christian education and her native Indianness. The grid filling was the highlight of the lesson, which required close rereading of the story.

Seven students answered that they liked the story. One of them wrote he liked the style, while two found its English too difficult. The fewness of the students who liked the story is probably due to the resistance of the ironical text to facile reading. Nevertheless, most responses to the discussion topic were appropriate, which shows that not a few students got the point of the story, though they might not be sure about the details.

3.5 'Summum Bonum'

The last lesson was planned as a relief from the series of lost or unrequited love as well as an occasion to let the students look again at the way how the shape of a poem is related to the meaning of the poem. In the lesson on Jon Silkin's poem, I gave tasks which would draw the students' attention to the shape of the stanzas. After the feedback on Silkin's poem, the concrete poem by Browning would be appropriate as

another instance of close relationship between the form and the subject matter of a poem. I adopted the language activity given by Carter and Long (1987) which lets the students examine the patterns of language such as the shape of the poem on the page and the use of rhyme.

In spite of the relative simplicity of the poem, only two students found it interesting. One of them wrote that at first she had no idea what the poem meant, but once she got it, she liked it very much, especially the last line crystallizing the supreme good. This explains the unpopularity of the poem; the poem remained unintelligible to many of the students.

4 Jon Silkin's 'Death of a Son'

In this section, I report in detail on the two-period lesson on Jon Silkin's poem,³ because the step-by-step approach which I adopted in introducing the poem to students with no background in English poetry includes techniques which will be readily applied in teaching other poems. After a few introductory remarks about the reason why I chose this particular poem and the approach I took, I will present the two lesson plans, which are prepared to help the students explore the poem by slow steps. The section concludes with the students' response to the poem.

4.1 The poem and an appropriate approach to it

The primary reason I decided to include this poem in my course was that I found it deeply moving and wanted very much to share the experience of reading it with my students. This is a valid reason for taking up a teaching material, for, as Carter and Long say, '[i]n the teaching of literature the infectious enthusiasm of a teacher can be crucial' (1991, 23). The poem is a good example of literature as 'wonderful source material for eliciting strong emotional responses from our students' (Lazar 1993). The feelings evoked from the poem may be those of sadness or solemnity, but as it is about the most fundamental human condition, death, it does not fail to have universal appeal. Moreover, this is not an ordinary death, but the death of an autistic child incapable of human response, even to his father's love. When the rapid progress of informational technology tends to make flesh-and-blood contact and communication

between people rather more difficult, the ending of the poem which tells of the silent human response of the child to his father at the last moment may have wider social relevance to us today than it had when the poem was written in the 1950s. Needless to say, one of the most important aims of reading a literary text is to be involved in the human issues depicted in it and to relate them to the reader's own experience.

My emphasis in teaching this poem was thus placed on involvement and response. But to be involved and respond, students have first of all to know what the poem is about, what the poet feels about the death of his son. To show them a 'way-in' to the poem and to ensure 'the closest and most direct engagement with' the poem (Carter and Long 1991, 10), I took a language-based approach,⁴ and started from simple language work. Proceeding from language work would make the poem accessible to the students with almost no experience in English poetry. If I could let them follow a slow, step-by-step linguistic approach, they would not only be able to share the deep feelings of the poem but also to experience the joy of recognition and discovery on their own.

Moreover, this text has features to be made good use of for language work. With this poem, language exercises will lead straight to understanding and appreciation of its poetic language. The vocabulary is simple and limited; the syntax is not complicated; but it is this simplicity of vocabulary and syntax, combined with verbal repetition and parallelism, that gives this poem its unique force and makes it a genuine expression of strong feelings. Language exercises on this poem, then, should mainly exploit the limited and repeated vocabulary and sentence patterns, together with another conspicuous formal feature, the shape of the stanzas which conforms to, or clashes with the syntax.⁵

4.2 The two-period lesson

4.2.1 Plan for lesson one

1. Tell students that they are going to read a poem, write the title and subtitle on the blackboard, and ask students to make sentences from them. They will produce such sentences as 'My son died at the age of one,' 'He died in a hospital,' 'He was mentally ill,' etc. Write the sentences on the blackboard and keep them there. The aim of this is to let them grasp the theme and factual background of the poem.

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2. Ask students to give words related with 'death' and 'son'. With 'death', cognate words like 'dead' and 'die' will be produced. But any associated words like 'ill', 'funeral' etc. will do. With 'son', 'boy', 'child', 'baby' and 'infant' are expected. This simple vocabulary exercise is intended to raise an expectation for the vocabulary used in the poem. Again these words are written on the blackboard and kept there.
3. The teacher writes the words (*sad, grief, hysterical, guilty, heartbroken*, or such) on the blackboard and students are asked to choose (and add) the word (s) that express the feelings a parent who has lost a little child would have. The aim of this activity is the same as that of 2.
4. Play the prerecorded tape by a native speaker through once to give them an overall view of the poem.⁶
5. Play it a second time, asking them to note down the words they hear repeatedly in the poem. After the reading, ask them to report the words and write them on the blackboard. This is a good listening exercise. They do not have to worry about the words they do not hear well. They have only to listen for conspicuous words, which they will realize later are the key words in the poem. The words picked up will be *something, house(s), stone(s), silence, brick, flesh, blood, this, he*, etc. Even *like, and, but* are welcomed, though I will have to pass by the frequent use of the coordinate conjunctions which may be meaningful in the poem.
6. Distribute the text and ask them to count the number of occurrence of the words they noted down. Doing this simple game-like activity, students will feel happy to find that they have heard right.
7. Ask them to check whether any words listed in activities 2 and 3 occur in the poem. They will find none of them except for *death* and *died*.
8. Relay-reading. Ask students to read aloud the poem in turn until they come to a period. They will find to their puzzlement that in some parts the ends of lines or stanzas do not concur with the ends of sentences.
9. Hand out the sheet of the poem written in sentences. This helps students to see at a glance what they did in activity 8, and makes it easy for them to grasp the sentence structure.

e.g. He did not bless silence/like bread, with words./

He did not forsake silence.//

But rather, like a house in mourning/kept the eye turned in to watch the silence
while/the other houses like birds/sang around him.//

(/=end of a line; // =end of a stanza)

Then students are asked to pick out the subjects and predicate verbs of all the finite clauses. In this process, they will get the literal meaning of the poem. They will, however, have some difficulty with instances of ellipsis of subject or verb, and sentences without enough punctuation. Some grammatical explanation by the teacher will be necessary.

4.2.2 Plan for lesson two

In the previous lesson, students are helped to identify the limited and repeated vocabulary and notice the frequency of syntactical parallelism and run-on lines without enough punctuation. The aim of the second lesson is to enable students to find out what are meant by the vocabulary items and where those syntactical features are concentrated. This will lead students to realize the poet's struggles by means of tortured repetition and parallelism to define what the experience of having an autistic child meant to him and to express his inexpressible grief over his loss. Most of the activities are done in pairs on a worksheet. On the worksheet the following tasks are given.

Task 1 Fill in the grid with either + (yes), or - (no): when you have guessed, put () on + or -. You may not be able to fill in all. The underlined words are from the poem.⁷

	sing	laugh	breathe	move	made of bricks & stones	flesh and blood	hear and speak	die	other features
<u>something</u>									
<u>the other houses</u>									
<u>this house</u>									
an ordinary house									
<u>he</u>									
a normal child									
<u>the silence</u>									
<u>this</u>									
<u>the (other) birds</u>									

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1. Which items in the left column did you find most difficult to fill in?
2. What (Who) do you think each of the underlined words refers to?

Task 2 Look at the whole poem.

1. What do you think is the standard shape of a stanza of the poem?
2. Which stanzas look different from most of the others?
3. Divide the poem into three (or four) parts according to the shape of the stanzas.
What do you think each part is about?
4. In which part do you find many of the difficulties you have had in Activity 9 in Lesson one?

After each of the above tasks the class is called together to share findings and thoughts.

By now it is hoped that the first aim of the second lesson mentioned above has been achieved. The following tasks are for interpretative work based on the features of the poem so far identified.

Task 3

1. Why do you think the poet does not use words like 'son', or 'child', but uses other words and phrases, to refer to his son? What does he mean by these words and phrases?
2. Why do you think the poet repeats 'this was...' in lines 26 to 34?
3. Pick out the sentences where the words 'the eye' or 'the look' appear. Do you see any change in the ways 'the eye' or 'the look' acts? Compare those words with 'his eyes' in the last line.
4. You have found no words or phrases expressing directly how the poet feels about his son's death. Doesn't he feel anything, then? If he feels anything, which word(s), phrase(s), or line(s) do you think express his feelings most strongly?

Task 4 Write how you feel about the poem. Do you like it or not?

1. If you like it, which part of the poem do you find most moving? What is there in that part that moves you so much?
2. If you don't like it, find out the reason(s) why you don't like it.

Task 3 was initially intended for group work, but because of the limited time, it was done individually together with Task 4 and handed in at the end of the class. In the whole course of the lesson, the students were allowed to use Japanese in discussion.

4.3 The students' response

To the question of Task 4, more than half of the students answered they liked the poem and found it moving, though at the final questionnaire the number of those who liked the poem was reduced to thirteen, one third of the class. Those who answered that they didn't like it stated as reasons that it was very sad, or that they didn't understand it well. Nevertheless, I was pleased to find that most of the answers to the questions of Task 3 were pertinent.

Some students proved to be quite perceptive. One student drew attention to the use of an indefinite article instead of a deictic *my* in the subtitle. She wrote that the poet could not at first regard his son as belonging to him; the child seemed to him to be something abstract. Another took up the first line as most expressive; the line, he wrote, expresses the poet's sense of loss that something, though not quite human, which has always been with him, is no longer there. Two others noticed the frequency of negatives in the first six stanzas, while another the use of 'this was', instead of the usual 'that was'. Most of the students who liked the poem answered that the last stanza was most moving, one student pointing to the rawness of the adjective 'Red'.

Were they not sensitized to language to such an extent that grammatical items like articles, deictics, negatives, etc. came to look meaningful? Through the slow, step-by-step language-based approach, they were able to find out meaningful stylistic features on their own. What remained to do next was integrating all these features into a coherent interpretation, which, however, seemed beyond the ability of the students uninitiated in literary criticism. Therefore, in the last lesson when the task sheets were returned, I demonstrated a tentative interpretation of the poem, integrating most of the students' answers on the sheets.

5 The overall response and the conclusion

The overall response to the course from the students was polarized. Of 38 students

who finished the course, six were enthusiastic about the course, and sixteen responded more or less positively, while three seemed to reject the course entirely because it was much different from what they expected an English course to be. Three others gave no answers. The remaining nine gave more or less negative answers, though all of them mentioned one or two works they liked.

Those who were enthusiastic or positive about the course found this 'new way of learning English' more or less interesting and exciting. Four of them wrote that at first they were puzzled at new materials, but through various activities and rereading, they found deeper meanings and became more interested in them. One student reported that he realized that he had been learning English just for the sake of reading such works as 'Lispeth' and 'Death of a Son'. On the other hand, those students who gave negative responses confessed that they were overwhelmed by the volume and difficulty of materials and activities. Some of them doubted if there was any point in studying poetry which has no practical use.

Despite these negative responses, I conclude that teaching literary texts by language-based approaches in the EFL classroom is worth trying. Few other materials can elicit enthusiastic responses from the students, or touch their hearts deeply.

The teacher should, however, take great care not to leave any students with a frustrated feeling of failure. One of the reasons that there were some students in my class who felt overwhelmed by the difficulty of materials was that I did not do any translation in the class. It will be a good idea, then, to think of activities involving some translation work, which will diminish the uneasiness of the students who are not used to not depending on translation. In order not to let the students feel overloaded as I did in my course, it would be better to reduce the number of activities on a material and take more time on each activity. One of the great merits of a literary text is that slow reading will reveal deeper meanings so that students with advanced abilities will not get bored. Poetry will need a slower introduction to uninitiated students. Once students have the satisfaction to feel that they can make sense of a literary text with the help of well-prepared activities, they will not call its usefulness in question.

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Notes

- 1 The 1995 and earlier freshmen were required to take three general English courses, regardless of what they majored in. A new curriculum came into effect in 1998, which exempted English majors from taking any general English courses.
- 2 As the textbook used in the first semester was primarily intended to give information, the range of class activities appropriate for the book was limited. It was difficult to devise creative or group activities using its materials.
- 3 The text of the poem is given in Appendix.
- 4 I have to state here that I was greatly inspired by Peter Verdonk's analysis of the poem, though my approach was more similar to the analysis based on Geoffrey Leech's model. Verdonk applied to another poem. However, in my approach I did not make explicit use of the terms of cohesion and foregrounding, which he used as the key concepts in his analysis (Verdonk 1988).
- 5 Though some consonants are quite effective, I did not take up phonological features of the poem, as it is not rhymed nor its metre is regular.
- 6 I was lucky that I could have an English instructor record the poem on tape.
- 7 This is a hard task. The point is not to give definite answers, but to recognize ambiguities. The grid can tentatively be filled in as on the next page.

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	sing	laugh	breathe	move	made of bricks & stones	flesh and blood	hear and speak	die	other features
<u>something</u>	-	-					-		like a person like a house
<u>the other houses</u>	+	+	(+)	(+)	(+, -)	(+, -)	-	(+)	
<u>this house</u>			+		- (+)	+ (-)			
an ordinary house	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	
<u>he</u>	-	-	+	+	-	+	-	+	like a house, silence, as if... could speak,... could be sorry
a normal child	+	+	+	+	-	+	+	+	
<u>the silence</u>	(-)	(-)	+	+-			(-)		
<u>this</u>							+(-)		something else, silence, something reli- gious, shining
<u>the (other) birds</u>	+	(+)	+	+	(-)	(+)	-	(+)	

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Appendix

Death of a Son

(who died in a mental hospital aged one)

Something has ceased to come along with me.

Something like a person: something very like one.

And there was no nobility in it

Or anything like that.

[5] Something was there like a one year

Old house, dumb as stone. While the near buildings

Sang like birds and laughed

Understanding the pact

They were to have with silence. But he

[10] Neither sang nor laughed. He did not bless silence

Like bread, with words.

He did not forsake silence.

But rather, like a house in mourning

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Kept the eye turned in to watch the silence while
[15] The other houses like birds
Sang around him.

And the breathing silence neither
Moved nor was still.

I have seen stones: I have seen brick
[20] But this house was made up of neither bricks nor stone
But a house of flesh and blood
With flesh of stone

And bricks for blood. A house
Of stones and blood in breathing silence with the other
[25] Birds singing crazy on its chimneys.
But this was silence,

This was something else, this was
Hearing and speaking though he was a house drawn
Into silence, this was
[30] Something religious in his silence,

Something shining in his quiet,
This was different this was altogether something else:
Though he never spoke, this
Was something to do with death.

[35] And then slowly the eye stopped looking
Inward. The silence rose and became still.
The look turned to the outer place and stopped,
With the birds still shrilling around him.
And as if he could speak

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[40] He turned over on his side with his one year
Red as a wound
He turned over as if he could be sorry for this
And out of his eyes two great tears rolled, like stones, and he died.

Jon Silkin (1930-97)