EFL Literature Studies: Student Feedback on Teaching Methodology

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Bio Data

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Abstract

Research indicates that authentic literature is more frequently finding itself placed on university and college English as a Foreign Language syllabi. This paper examines this growing pedagogical trend. As Paran (2008) notes, enough conclusive evidence that specifically analyzes student reaction to how literature is incorporated in the classroom is lacking. This paper attempts to help partially fill this void. The research herein examines student reactions to three teaching methodologies that incorporate authentic literature in the classroom. This research was carried out over the fall 2009 semester at a foreign language university in Japan. Students were asked to respond critically to three short works of fiction. Student feedback was obtained through questionnaires and one-on-one interviews with the instructor. Qualitative data confirms previous research (Kellem, 2009) that argued for the inclusion of multiple approaches to literary analysis. It also reveals learner preferences for material that engages meta-cognitive awareness, and demonstrates that this awareness leads to improved performance and higher levels of work-related student satisfaction. This paper will discuss some of these findings, and make suggestions and recommendations for both further research and classroom methodology.

Key Words: authentic literature; literary analysis; reader-response theory; stylistics; student feedback

Introduction

As learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) begin English studies at increasingly younger ages, tertiary level EFL instructors can expect to encounter students with greater levels of English proficiency in lecture halls. How best to confront this issue and the resulting debate is nothing new (Ajideh, 2006; Benesch, 1993; Gieve, 1998; Kramsch & Nolden, 1994). The role that literature plays within this context has also received attention. Examining literature's role in

this trend, Hall (2005) noted the increasing tendency of introducing literature to facilitate language teaching since the latter part of the past century. Evidence (Ajideh, 2006; Paran, 2008) has since suggested that this is no longer a trend but has become the norm. However, as Paran (2008) duly noted, although much research has identified how best to utilize literature in the EFL classroom, little research exists on how learners react to classroom literature teaching practices. As Paran puts it, "findings in this area [learner perspectives on the methodology of literature instruction] are still quite rare, and it is extremely difficult to make any generalizations" (Paran, 2008, p. 477), a view shared by Green (1993) and Altan (2006). Instead, the majority of research has focused on how much a learner's language skills have improved from a test-driven, quantitative perspective (i.e., have learner skills improved because of methodology *X,* and if so, to what degree), and has largely ignored a more qualitative perspective on student perceptions of classroom activities.

As Coxhead (2006) and Ajideh (2006) have argued, learners preparing to enroll in tertiary level studies in English speaking countries require support. However, how best to structure this support remains open to debate, as is the influence students have in determining the methodology instructors use in the classroom. This study finds its central focus in the latter, analyzing how students react to various forms of literature instruction. It examines the reaction of Japanese learners preparing to study overseas to three different approaches to integrating literature into a syllabus: (a) a "hands off" approach, used as a control, where neither scaffolding nor schema activating activities are used, and students are asked to explore a text with no support from the instructor; (b) a stylistics approach; and (c) an approach that combines stylistics with reader-response theory that is prefaced by a teacher-centered lecture on literary theory designed to promote meta-cognitive awareness. Data collected were qualitative and obtained from questionnaires as well as one-on-one interviews with the instructor.

Some of the questions guiding this research included the following: How beneficial is scaffolding from a student's perspective? What are learner perspectives on being made aware of the theory behind the teaching methodology? How would students react to being placed in this position of meta-cognitive awareness? What is their attitude regarding how literature is discussed or analyzed in the classroom? This study examines the answers to these questions and helps close the gap between learner and instructor perspectives on classroom methodology. This paper concludes with suggestions for EFL teachers and for further research in this area.

Background

Although previous work did much to outline the chasm that existed between the study of literature and language studies, or as Kramsch and Nolden (1994) described it, "the institutionalized dichotomy between literary studies and language training" (Kramsch & Nolden, 1994, p. 28), the academic community has since worked to erase this division. The EFL community is beginning to forge closer ties with literature studies and more frequent occurrences of their integration abound (see Carter, 2007 and Paran, 2008 for extensive reviews of such studies). However, a significant amount of the literature examines learner strategies and beliefs, but little research has discussed student views on literature teaching methodology in advanced-level tertiary EFL settings (Altan, 2006; Green, 1993; Paran, 2008).

Mori (1999) argued for teachers to concentrate more on student in-class assessments so as to match teaching methodologies with student beliefs. She focused her research on second language (L2) learner beliefs about learning in general and its relationship to L2 acquisition, arguing that learner beliefs cannot be reduced to a single theory. Her study, conducted at two American universities, used an exploratory factor analysis on a belief questionnaire administered to 187 language students. The results drew similarities to previous work (Schommer, 1990). She concluded that epistemological beliefs held by students are multi-dimensional and complex (specifically, that beliefs about L2 acquisition and learning in general are unrelated), and that instructors must be conscious of learner beliefs to facilitate effective classroom instruction.

Green's 1993 study used quantitative data to research whether students enjoyed activities that emphasize language content (a style akin to a reader-response approach) or language correctness (a style akin to a stylistics approach), and how students react to unfamiliar teaching methodologies. Green concluded that students did not view the language correctness approach as more beneficial. Furthermore, his results suggested that students were open to new teaching styles. However, his data failed to reveal whether students linked enjoyable activities with effective learning. He concluded that his results were not categorical, but could aid future studies that hope to identify both what instructors want to teach and what students find beneficial and enjoyable.

Matsuura, Chiba and Hilderbrandt (2001) examined feedback from Japanese university EFL students on classroom methodology. They concluded that despite EFL classroom trends

toward a more student-centered environment, a significant amount of learners still preferred a more traditional EFL pedagogy that included a teacher-centered methodology (for a review of traditional and current EFL teaching practices, see Matsuura et al., 2001). Almost 81% of the 301 participants in their study supported a teacher-centered approach, with about a quarter of respondents specifically citing lectures as an effective way to learn English.

The conclusions of Matsuura et al. (2001) are open to debate. Liu R., Liu Y. and Qiao (2006) found that university level English as a Second Language (ESL) instructors in the United States were using a teacher-centered methodology despite extensive research that supported a student-centered approach (McCombs & Whistler, 1997; Pillay, 2002; Weimer, 2002). Liu et al. claimed that something must be wrong if instructors are using a teacher-centered approach and that an "awareness of this discrepancy may encourage universities to promote more training in the learner-centered approach" (Liu et al., 2006, p. 86). These two studies reveal a serious gap, then, between what students want and what research suggests instructors should be doing. Instructors, researchers and students have failed to agree on the best learning and teaching styles. This dichotomy presents a serious problem for researchers, instructors and learners alike.

Regarding approaches to literature instruction, positive responses to teaching methodology from student perspectives were found when instructors used a reader-response approach (Ali, 1993; Daniels, 1994; Davis, 1989; Hirvela, 1996). Hirvela (1996) drew attention to a comparison between a personal response approach (which favors a text-as-authority perspective) and a reader-response approach (which significantly reduces the reader-text dichotomy). He discussed how these two approaches overlap, but failed to comment on how the two could be integrated, favoring instead a more traditional single theory approach – here, reader-response theory. The studies of Davies (1998) and Zyngier (2001) produced similar data using a stylistics approach.

All of the aforementioned studies have examined a one-dimensional pedagogical approach to teaching literature. However, some researchers have begun to stretch these traditional limits, incorporating multiple pedagogical theories into their investigations. Using an integrated approach to literature studies, Wang (2009) surveyed 162 non-English major university students in Taiwan. She reported that the majority of the participants found an integrated approach beneficial, citing proficiency gains in reading, translation, grammar, listening, speaking, writing and problem analysis. In addition, her work suggested that students

enjoyed this approach. Wang's study demonstrated that students support an integrated approach and firmly believe such an approach benefits L2 acquisition.

Baba (2008), Kellem (2009) and Timucin (2001) also noted that an integrated approach was something both students enjoyed and instructor's found beneficial (Kellem combined a reader-response approach with a stylistics approach; Baba combined a personal-response approach and stylistics; Timucin combined a language-based approach with stylistics). The results of these studies suggested that an integrated approach is effective for literature studies at advanced EFL levels.

In these studies, learners reacted positively to a single methodology, and more recently, to approaches that combined theories of literary analysis. These responses are noteworthy because each methodology is supported by research that demonstrates improved language skills and learner satisfaction. However, the research remains inconclusive, as Paran (2008) noted, and suggests that student perceptions remain difficult to interpret.

Of the studies commented on thus far Kellem's 2009 work resonates best with this study. In his work, Kellem argued for the inclusion of an integrated approach to teaching literature. He supports his argument with the *foremeaning approach*, claiming that the combined benefits of a stylistics and reader-response approach place "equal importance on the study of language elements and responding personally [to literature]" (Kellem, 2009, p. 12), asking instructors to "bridge the gap between aesthetic and stylistic reading approaches and to show how pleasure and understanding can coincide and feed off each other" (Kellem, 2009, p. 15). Kellem, Baba (2008) and Timucin (2001) extol the virtues of a fresh approach to EFL literature instruction, but what is not addressed is the reaction students have to such approaches. Accurately assessing how students feel about a teaching methodology is essential, as this perspective can help influence teaching strategies and aid curriculum development.

In summary, a review of the current literature suggests the following:

- student beliefs and instructor beliefs about learning still vary greatly (specifically with regard to student-centered and teacher-centered methodologies);
- positive responses to integrated teaching methods, stylistics and reader-response approaches, have all, to some degree, had positive feedback from students who thought their language skills were improving from these methods; but

- this feedback is too orientated toward L2 performance; it is far from conclusive regarding student views on methodology and fails to allow both theorists and practitioners to draw conclusions about student perspectives on approaches to teaching.

It is within this context that this research finds its place.

Participants

This study examined 48 second year native Japanese speakers enrolled at Kansai Gaidai University, a private foreign language university in Japan. All of the participants were either social science or humanity majors. Students needed a minimum TOEFL paper-based test score of 500 to enroll. Of the 48 students enrolled, four had a score lower than 500 (490), yet were admitted regardless, and 36 had plans to study overseas in an English speaking country. Of those 36, 35 scored over 500 on the TOEFL PBT. As this research examines data from students preparing to go abroad, only the data collected from these 35 students were assessed.

Method

A significant portion of the course aimed to prepare students for instruction at English speaking, tertiary level institutions outside Japan. This study assessed their reaction to three different methodologies for teaching authentic literature. The data collected was qualitative and based on questionnaires and one-on-one interviews; these were administered after each section of the experiment. A fourth interview was administered to obtain the students' overall reaction to the three different teaching methodologies. In each section students worked individually and in small groups. Both written and oral responses to the literature were required, as was a 500-word personal response essay to each story.

Section one provided students with no scaffolding and was designed to act as a control. Students were given Anton Chekhov's short story "A Wicked Boy" to read. In-class work was performed using the story, a dictionary, and a worksheet. The worksheet included factual questions (the who, what, where and when of the story), questions on stylistics and comprehension questions in the form of extended in-class group discussion questions that dealt with situations from the text (adapted from Gajdusek's [1988] classroom model).

Section two used a different methodology. Asked to read John Steinbeck's short story

"Over the Hill", students were given pre-reading, schema-activating activities that included context building, biographical information about the author, and they were introduced to basic literary devices such as hyperbole, mood, foreshadowing, juxtaposition and personification. This scaffolding was heavily student-centered. Activities were framed within a stylistics approach and also included lexical analysis. Adopting Hirvela's (1996) suggestions, questions about stylistics were such that students were asked to discuss, for example, Steinbeck's choice of vocabulary or metaphor. Although the questions were stylistic in nature, they did not restrict the students to right or wrong responses. The discussion questions required readers to produce personal responses to the text, discouraging objective style answers. The intent here was to engage students in a personal discourse with the story and its author.

Section three built on the stylistics response methodology used in section two, but also integrated a reader-response approach. Prior to reading students were introduced, in a teacher-centered lecture, to some of the main tenets of reader-response theory. The scaffolding here was exclusively teacher-centered. The lecture promoted one of this theory's central themes, that one can approach literature as an experience instead of an object in need of examination: "The ways we interpret the words of the text are analogous to the way we make sense of personal experiences – interpretations are determined by the events we encounter and in the text by the words we read" (Davis, 1989, p. 421). Students were also exposed to Hirvela's 1996 interpretation that discussed the reader and author as equally responsible for generating meaning from the text, thus dissolving the one way author-reader passive continuum (Hirvela, 1996). What was being promoted was an active literary experience where the author and reader are engaged in a dialectical relationship. (For a detailed outline of reader-response theory see Davis, 1989 and Hirvela, 1996.) Students were asked only to take notes during the lecture.

With only this lecture as support students were asked to read Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery". Section three did not include scaffolding and schema-related activities that were provided in section two. Instead, the scaffolding was presented only by way of the aforementioned lecture. This section combined a stylistics approach (that students were familiar with from section two) with a reader-response approach. The rationale for this integrated approach is provided by Baba (2008), Divsar & Tahriri (2009), Kellem (2009), Timucin (2001) and Wang (2009), all of whom argue that approaches to literary analysis need not be mutually exclusive. Regarding stylistics, instances of literary devices were no longer pointed out and

explained. Instead, paragraph or page number references were used as a guide and students needed to create their own analyses. With this foundation in stylistics present, discussion questions were framed in the hue of a reader-response approach. Students were asked to interpret the text relative to their own experiences.

At the conclusion of section three a fourth interview was administered. Here, students were asked to reflect on all three sections of the experiment and to answer questions that were relative to the other sections.

Results

Of the three sections, 100% of the students were least pleased with section one. Stress levels were recorded highest here. They found the assignment too difficult, to the point of de-motivating them. Twenty-eight percent of students, however, commented that they were very motivated, believing literature classes in English speaking countries operated in such an extremely scaffold-less manner. Their motivation came from thinking that in the future they would be required to do such independent work.

Most students spent time trying to understand the plot and they could not move beyond that into a more in-depth literary analysis. Group work and conversations centered on factual events in the story. Hints of more in-depth analysis were present, but without any supporting material students were often left speculating. Answers to the questionnaire regarding stylistics were met with mixed responses. Sixty-three percent of respondents claimed that their lack of English abilities prevented them from answering the comprehension questions. Almost 29% of respondents blamed a lack of scaffolding, recognizing that it was not an issue of language skills, but a lack of schema that triggered problems. Comments recorded in group work included "it depends on when it was written", "what do you know about Russia?", "I don't understand this story" and off-topic discussion that did not contribute to the understanding of the story. Students had a difficult time focusing on the material, and those who were able to focus felt frustrated.

Comments in interviews echoed the data collected from the questionnaire. Thirty-one percent of students recognized that they did not understand the story to their satisfaction, citing that with more information a deeper understanding could have developed. One learner noted the following: "If we studied about more Russian culture in high school maybe problems in a [sic.] story could be more understand [sic.]." Students agreed overwhelmingly that this style of literary

analysis did not make them want to study or read literature in the future. A third of the respondents believed that some form of scaffolding or schema-activating material would have made the story more interesting and understandable, but 94% of students put at least some of the blame for their lack of understanding on themselves. This scaffold-less approach, although motivating for a few, produced two significant results. One, that a significant number of students blamed themselves for their lack of understanding, and two, that their motivation to continue reading literature dropped significantly. When asked directly if they would be interested in studying another story using the same approach, 80% of students answered no.

Section two produced different results. Stress levels dropped while interest and motivation levels increased significantly. Almost 89% of students thought they understood the story more than in section one. They were able to clearly understand the plot and could relate to the story and discuss it in a more personal manner. Comments recorded during discussions included the following: "Why didn't Steinbeck just write it like this?"; "That's because the writer thinks…"; "I think I get it now – kind of"; "It's not clear, but…". Students were beginning to engage with the text critically and were making efforts to apply the meaning derived from the text to their own lives.

In interviews conducted after section two students mentioned being able to "see" what authors are doing and why they do these things. One student noted, "My English teacher last year had parents from Italy so I could understand why Mr. Steinbeck made Sligo have a strange Italian accent. I had [sic.] imagined this about my teacher's parents". Many noted that knowing about the time, place and ideology of the writer and the time he was writing in increased their learning experience. Seventy-one percent said they enjoyed the learning process. Asked again if they would be interested in studying literature in this manner, 80% percent of students answered yes.

In section three stress levels again dropped significantly, and personal satisfaction with the learning experience measured highest. Motivation levels also measured highest here, as did student awareness of underlying textual meaning and its relation to their experiences. Regarding the stylistics approach, satisfaction levels dipped slightly below those of section two. Students claimed to have understood more from the text on a personal level, but less stylistically. When queried about this, 89% of students were, nonetheless, happier with this approach: "I think I'll be doing more of this reader-response style things [sic.] when I get to America so this is good for

me." Another commented that "I've been doing the stylist [sic.] thing in high school sometimes. This new way was better." Asked about continuing to study literature in the coming weeks, 86% of students asked that the instructor take this third approach. Further, 91% of students preferred that scaffolding be provided by a teacher-centered lecture. Overall, 88% of respondents also preferred the overall methodology of section three, and over 90% rated their personal satisfaction with this section as the highest.

Although the workload was heaviest in section three, most students favored this style of instruction. Regarding meta-cognition specifically, the following question was asked: "Was is it beneficial to have reader-response theory explained to you before the reading?" Ninety-four percent of respondents answered yes. Almost 69% mentioned having similar reader-response theory experiences with other work they had read, but none had understood why they were analyzing texts as they were. When queried specifically about the teacher-centered lecture, 88% of respondents said they preferred this teaching style. When asked why, almost 69% said it was because they thought classes are taught like this overseas. Twenty-nine percent said it was nice to get a break from a student-centered approach. Overall, regarding section three, students claimed to now have a better understanding of literary analysis, and more importantly (they highlighted), what is "going on", or underlying, much of the work of good literature.

Lastly, in the fourth interview learners were asked whether they preferred scaffolding that was biographical in nature or scaffolding that dealt with literary theory. Eighty-eight percent preferred the latter. When asked why, 27% said because they believed overseas universities to be like this. Twenty-eight percent said they preferred it because it was teacher-centered; 36% of respondents said the reader-response approach allowed them to be part of the process of meaning building in a more direct, personal manner. Eighty-three percent of respondents also claimed they felt most comfortable talking about their ideas within the parameters set up by a reader-response approach. Learners said it allowed them more freedom of expression than at other times when they were asked to comment on literature.

Limitations and Discussion

This study lacks an in-depth statistical analysis, and further research in this area must seek to include it. A larger sample size as well as a control group would also provide more sound quantitative results. As mentioned at the outset, however, the goal of this research was to

produce qualitative data, and it sought to achieve an initial first glance into advanced-level learner perspectives on how they prefer to perform literary analyses.

Despite these flaws, results from this study support the view of Matsuura et al. (2001) that teacher-centered methodologies, at least at this advanced level and within the context of literary studies, have a place in the EFL classroom. The data also supports Kellem's position that instructors "can develop activities that help students work with the language *and* engage with and personally respond to the material" (Kellem, 2009, p. 16). These conclusions are supported by data collected in section three of this study. Before discussing these in detail, it is worth commenting on sections one and two.

The frustration noted by students in section one cannot legitimately be blamed on their lack of English skills (as so many respondents claimed). Much of the frustration may have come from learner awareness that literature provides something more than just an analytical understanding of words on a page. Such awareness is rightly frustrating for students. For instructors, however, it is motivating. This frustration indicates that schema for literary analysis is already present, and by changing classroom methodology instructors can provide learners with the necessary tools to unearth the meaning they believe underlies great literature.

Section two failed to provide significant findings. Given the amount of student-centered scaffolding and schema related activities provided by the instructor, the data reflects other results that have used a stylistics approach. The data collected here supports these studies (Davies, 1998 or Zyngier, 2001, for example).

Section three provides the most interesting data. A correlation between a heavy workload and high stress levels did not exist, suggesting that with increased meta-cognitive awareness, the correct scaffolding, or a combination of the two, learners accept heavier workloads if they are aware of the theory supporting their activities.

The results also show that students are more content with activities that challenge them to think about material relative to their own experiences. Even though the majority of students noted they understood less of the story in section three from an analytical perspective, an overwhelming majority (88%) still preferred this balanced reader-response approach that was initially supported by a stylistics analysis of the text. At this advanced- learner level students are prepared, or at least – and perhaps more importantly – are willing, to move beyond a language-centered methodology to one that asks them to develop a personal relationship with the text.

This does not undermine the importance of the stylistics approach incorporated in section three. One reason for such a high percentage of positive responses to the reader-response approach is that students possessed a clear understanding of a stylistics analysis that the scaffolding of section two provided. Undoubtedly, much of that experience transferred to section three. How much this assistance influenced learner responses remains unclear. Further studies that include a student control group instead of a methodological one would help resolve these problems.

Students also reacted favorably to the introduction of literary theory. Literary theory, based on its reception here, certainly has a place in EFL instruction. It helps promote L2 discourse, and with it students do not have to follow instructions blindly. Instead they do so with meta-cognitive support. Having the link to an actual theory helps solidify much of their ideas, recognizing them now not so much as right or wrong, but as existing on a plane of subjectivity that is influenced by their own experiences and what they bring to a text. Students reported feeling that there is a foundation that now supports their interpretation, however eclectic it may be. For group oriented cultures where EFL is taught, the backing of an academic theory to boost an individual's ideas provides support for those students apprehensive about expressing themselves. Doubt remains about whether the introduction of the theory behind a reader-response approach solidifies a learner's understanding of the text or not, but it legitimizes a place for them inside the literary world. In this manner, the dichotomy between author and reader begins to disappear, and learners can find a legitimate place for their voices to be heard.

The results also show strong support for teacher-centered lectures. As noted in the literature review, traditional theories of EFL pedagogy suggest a much more learner-friendly, student-centered approach. As this study notes, (and as Matsuura et al. [2001] also concluded), this is not always the approach favored by students. Despite Liu et al.'s (2006) claim, this research posits that there *is* room in EFL instruction for a teacher-centered classroom; moreover, as the evidence herein suggests, it is an approach favored by advanced-level EFL students within the context of literary studies.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that EFL students at more advanced levels preparing to study overseas are more comfortable analyzing literature when (a) they are presented with material in a teacher-centered manner, (b) the material they are presented with improves meta-cognitive awareness

and provides the rationale behind classroom activities, and (c) when they have sufficient scaffolding (regardless of their awareness of it). Learners become actively involved in the learning process at multiple levels in this manner. They produce the target language discourse but are also doing so under clear and precise guidance that moves beyond the authority of the instructor and into the realm of academics – literary theory here – in a broader, yet more welcoming style. Results also indicate that methodologies reserved traditionally for native speakers, that is, teacher-centered lectures, can transfer over into EFL studies.

From a student's perspective there is a place for scaffolding that engages their meta-cognitive awareness, for literary theory and for a teacher-centered methodology. This research supports putting students in a position that engages them as such. The implications of this positioning are students who are better prepared for literary analysis and, as is the case with reader-response theory, students who now have the justification – and more importantly an awareness of the justification – to position themselves inside a wider literary dialogue. This dialectical juxtaposition provides a solid foundation for L2 production that goes beyond what a purely stylistics analysis can provide for learners at this level. As one of the goals of literature is to take readers beyond this point, a teacher-centered methodology coupled with an integrated approach to literary analysis that incorporates meta-cognitive awareness has the overwhelming support of learners at this level.

More research is needed to support these claims, but the results described above suggest that further inquiry into the role literary theory plays – and the way it is presented to learners – in advanced level EFL literature classes may produce more detailed and elucidating results. Until such time, instructors should consider the benefits of an integrated approach to literature studies and should not reject presenting material to students preparing for overseas studies in a teacher-centered manner.

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