

Role of English Literature in English Education

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Abstract

Many Saitama University students belonging to the Faculty of Education want to take an English teacher's license. In order to take this license, to earn four academic credit units in literature is compulsory; students come to Uda's literature course every year. However, in 2009, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued a "New Teaching Guidelines". About English education, the new guidelines put more emphasis on "communication". Besides the national educational policy, the whole world in the 21st century is getting more globalized and the needs for practical English are getting higher. In these circumstances, what is the meaning of leaning literature? How do Saitama University students think about literature? Kazuko Uda and Kholida Gegmatova made a joint research about the meaning of literature through two class meetings in Uda's literature course. The result was that the students found out the power of literature for our life and for practical communication. English literature benefits English education.

Keywords: English literature, English communication, Charles Dickens, TOEIC

1. Introduction: English Literature for Teacher's License and Communication

1.1 Foreword

Kazuko UDA belongs to the English Education Section and teaches one course of English literature. Four academic credits are mandatory in order to obtain an English teacher's license; Saitama University has to offer English literature courses, and students have to take at least four credits in English literature if they want to take the license.

However, English education at schools in Japan is undergoing changes toward "communication" abiding by the guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. For example, in December 2009, this Ministry published *Explanations for the Teaching Guidelines at Senior High Schools: Foreign Languages and English*. In this booklet, in the section of "Basic Policy for Improvements", one part states as below: We try to cultivate four basic skills of "listening", "speaking", "reading" and "writing" in good balance; through the application and synthesis of these four basic skills, we have to try to cultivate communication ability among students.¹

Under this shift of national policy putting more emphasis on communication, interest in English learning is also shifting to communication. One of the proofs is the expansion of TOEIC Test.

1.2 TOEIC Test

TOEIC, Test of English for International Communication, was developed by Educational Testing Service, a non-profit test-developing organization in New Jersey. TOEIC is a standardized world-wide English test, which intends to measure communication ability from a wide perspective. It is now the most common English test in the world, used near 150 countries.²

The first Open Test was conducted in 1979, with 3,000 individual participants. Two years later, in 1981, TOEIC IP (Institutional Program) was created so that the test can be taken at specific institutes; i.e. schools, universities and businesses. In the first IP Test in 1981, 2,000 institutes participated, while individual participants in the Open Test were 10,000. In 2001, institutes in IP were 698,000, while the individuals were 582,000; IP number exceeded the individuals'. IP superiority continued. In 2014, IP was 1,287,000; individuals were 1,113,000.³ Institutes now make more use of TOEIC than individual English learners. This indicates educational institutes, such as schools and universities are keen on educating English communication.

1.3 English as a Common Language in Corporations

Another proof for expansion of English communication is in corporations. Increasing number of Japanese corporations are using English as the common language for their business. Rakuten, Inc., Fast Retailing Co., Ltd and Nissan Motor Co., Ltd are using English only. SoftBank Group Corp., Honda Motor Co., Ltd, Bridgestone Corp., Takeda Pharmaceutical Corporation, Asahi Breweries, Ltd, Sharp Corporation, Mitsubishi Estate Co., Ltd, etc. are going to use more English for their business and trying to train their employees' English.⁴

1.4 Communication vs. Literature

The national policy and the social trend about English are heading for communication, and yet, English literature is compulsory for English teacher's license. Facing this gap, Uda thought it necessary to investigate how her students are thinking about English literature and English communication. It is also necessary for Uda to try to make her literature course more enjoyable and useful for her students by making use of the result of the investigation. Kazuko Uda and Kholida Begmatova, research student from Uzbekistan, studying English literature under the tutorship of Kazuko Uda, made a comparative study between literature and TOEIC on 21 students registered in Uda's English literature course.

2. Method: Two Comparative Class Meetings with Different English Materials

2.1 Survey about Literature

Uda and Begmatova had two class meetings for this comparative study. In the first class meeting, the students read the first two paragraphs of *A Christmas Carol* (1843) written by Charles Dickens (1812-70). Copies had been handed out in the previous week; students had prepared for the two paragraphs. In the class, showing PowerPoint slides, Uda gave a general explanation about Dickens and *A Christmas Carol*. Next, students tried to understand, through Uda's guidance, the meaning of the English sentences, fixed English phrases, literary effects of Dickens's English, so-

cial background of the work, and the message of Dickens for his readers. Begmatova followed Uda; she read the passage twice in order to give real experiences of listening to the sound effects of Dickens's English, and asked questions about the passage to make sure whether the students fully understood the passage. Last of the team-teaching was a questionnaire. Students, 20 this week, wrote freely in Japanese about English literature or *A Christmas Carol*.

2.2 Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was born in Landport near Portsmouth in Britain. His father was an accounting clerk working for the Navy. In 1817, his family moved to Chatham. Charles's health was delicate when he was young; he could not play outside and he vigorously read famous works of literature in European countries. In 1822, his family moved to London. In 1824 his father fell into debt and Charles, as the oldest child, was forced to work in a factory to support his family. What was worse, his father was imprisoned in a debtors' prison; family was dispersed. Harsh working experiences and his father's imprisonment remained traumatic all his life, though these experiences contributed to his later literary creation.

His father could pay off his debt; family was united; Charles quitted working at the factory and began to go to school. In 1827, immediately after finishing his elementary school, Charles became a clerk to a lawyer. In 1828, he became a shorthand recorder at Doctors' Commons. In 1832, he became a correspondent for *True Sun*. Next year he was working for *Morning Chronicle*, a newspaper which was popular in those days. Charles also worked as a correspondent to other papers; soon he began publishing his literary pieces in papers and magazines. His first book, *Sketches by Boz*, anthology of essays, was published in 1836. His magazine series *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37) became a huge success; his fame and status as a writer was established. His major novels followed: *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), *Great Expectations* (1860-61), etc.

These works of Dickens were full of love and humanity, especially to those who were poor and belonging to lower classes in Victorian England. His sympathy to the lower classes was his reverse expression of criticism against the monetary society and the social injustice which originated from bureaucracy in those days. He was good at creating unique characters and he was also good at coinage. His English sentences were rhythmical and melodious when read aloud.

Since he loved being together with his readers, and his sentences sounded effective when read aloud, Dickens began "Public Reading" in 1858; this was to read a part from his own works in front of the audience. In these "Public Readings", Dickens and the general public shared the joy and the misery of life, had catharsis for their misery and felt ties between the author and the audience. Dickens died in 1870 from a stroke; lamentation spread both in Britain and overseas.

Dickens reflects his age; he had a sense of writer's mission to work for the society; and his sentences are full of literary writing techniques; Dickens is a good example as an English writer for an English literature survey.

2.3 *A Christmas Carol*

A Christmas Carol was first published on December 19th, 1843 by Chapman and Hall. It made a great success and was followed by four other “Christmas Books”. The protagonist of the story is Scrooge, a stingy cold-hearted merchant, just interested in making profits from his firm. On the eve of one Christmas, he was visited by the ghost of his former business partner, Marley, and was told he would be visited by three spirits. As having been told, Scrooge was visited by the three spirits: Past, Present and Future. Guided by those spirits, he came to repent his way of life he had been leading. When the Christmas morning dawned, he had been re-born to be a kind gentleman, full of sympathy and humanity to his kin, friends and neighbors. The message of the story was love and philanthropy: a favorite theme in the Victorian Era. It was no wonder the story made a big hit.

A Christmas Carol is popular in Japan too; as of August 7, 2016, Amazon online lists as many as 215 kinds of Japanese translations, Kindle versions included, on the market. *A Christmas Carol* shows the writer’s opinions about the society, his literary writing techniques, and the social background. This story is a good example of English literature for an English literature survey.

2.4 Students’ Response to the Class on *A Christmas Carol*

After finishing the team teaching about *A Christmas Carol*, Uda and Begmatova held a questionnaire survey: students wrote freely in Japanese how they felt about the work, class management of this team teaching and literature itself. Total 20 comment cards were collected. There were similar opinions; below are typical examples:

- Words were difficult; expressions were difficult; as a result, it was extremely difficult to understand the meaning of the passage.
- By listening to the explanations by Ms. Uda and through the questions & answers by Ms. Begmatova, I could understand the sentences and also what was behind the sentences.
- English literature expresses cultures. I found we should pay attention to the background when we read literature.
- Ms. Begmatova’s recitation in her real voice was fluent and beautiful. Her reading made the work alive, which led to my appreciation of Dickens’s melodious English.
- Ms. Begmatova’s questions helped my understanding of the passage, though the passage was tremendously difficult when I first read it by myself.

Summary of the comments will be: *A Christmas Carol* for Saitama University students was difficult to understand at first, but they found the joy of reading literature and the importance of understanding cultures and the social background. They totally appreciated the team-teaching class management by a Japanese teacher and a teacher from abroad.

2.5 Survey about Communication

Uda and Begmatova used TOEIC Test New Official Question Book, Vol. 6, published in 2004. This book was the standard exercise book for TOEIC before the TOEIC question style was changed in May 2016. In July 2016, when this survey was held, TOEIC Test in the new style had

been held only once. The new style had not been familiar yet and its validity had not been fully discussed. At Saitama University, all the students have to take a TOEIC Test, but the students in Uda's course took the old style. To use the new style would cause embarrassment to the students and become an obstacle for answering the questions; this was why the old style was used for this survey.

Copies of two sets of questions in the "Reading Part", "Questions 172-175" and "Questions 196-200", were handed out to the students on the spot of the survey. They were allowed 10 minutes to read the total three passages and answer the total nine questions.

Ten minutes passed; Begmatova told the correct answers. However, she did not check how many students gave the correct answer to which question, because the purpose of the survey was not to check scores but how the students thought about the English used in the TOEIC Test. Begmatova, next, read aloud the two passages to give an opportunity for the students to compare sound effects of Dickens's English and TOEIC English.

2.6 Students' Response to the TOEIC Class

Finishing the TOEIC class, Uda and Begmatova asked the students to write freely in Japanese about TOEIC. Twenty-one comment cards were handed in and typical comments are as bellow:

- Present-day English was used; it was easy to read the TOEIC passages and questions.
- Questions were about our familiar daily life. I also felt familiar with TOEIC English.
- TOEIC has its peculiar characteristics; TOEIC score does not necessarily show the examinee's real English ability. Quite often the score is a matter of answering techniques.
- TOEIC score is not a result of English ability but our concentration and mental endurance.
- TOEIC sentences are mechanical and monotonous: it was painful for me to read the passages.

Summary of the comments will be: Saitama students are doubtful about the validity whether TOEIC Test is a real indicator for real English ability. They felt the sentences and the context were contemporary and familiar; in this sense, the passages were easier to understand.

2.7 Students' Comparison between Literature and TOEIC

Last questionnaire by Uda and Begmatova was about the comparison of the two. Here again the twenty-one students wrote freely in Japanese. Their opinions can be summarized into the two below:

- When we read literature, we feel the author's humor and personality behind the sentences. We feel human nature. However, in TOEIC, what we read is just information and questions. We might be able to get a high score when we manipulate techniques, but there is no pleasure of reading.
- A work of literature remains long and strong in our mind; this is why some works continue to be loved and read hundreds of years.

Uda and Begmatova carried out two-week team-teaching classes and examined the meaning of learning literature in the age when the importance of communication is appealed. Through the class activities and the comment cards, the twenty-one Saitama University students taking Uda's

literature course came to recognize the characteristics of literature and its meaning for English acquisition and for our life as well. At the same time, they found functional precise English is more suitable for communication in the present world.

3. Conclusion

Through the two team-teaching classes by Uda and Begmatova, the twenty-one Saitama University students found the English used in literature near 200 years ago in England was difficult to understand, while the present-day functional type of English was easier to read. However, they also found the meaning of literature: literature is created with the author's intention; it has esthetic beauty; it reflects social background; and it gives us impact for our lives.

Okui (2010) says: "Especially English novels enable students to pseudo-experience many aspects of lives of people living in English speaking countries. English novels are useful in training students how to read between the lines and how to feel the emotions of others."⁵

We can safely say as a conclusion, when we learn English in the globalized 21st century, we should not forget the power of literature even when we try to develop practical English communication ability. If we study both literature and practice practical English, we can enrich both our lives and communication skills. If we want to cultivate English communication ability, we should study English literature, because literature makes our English rich and refined.

Notes

1. *Explanations for the Teaching Guidelines at Senior High Schools: Foreign Languages and English*, p.2
2. *TOEIC Test New Official Question Book*, Vol.6, p.5
3. http://www.toeic.or.jp/library/toeic_data/
4. matome.never.jp/odai/2144054770821558201
5. Yutaka Okui, "A Critical Study on English Education for Practical English", *The Future of English Studies*, p.47

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