

Introduction to Japanese Literature: How to Interest Young Students

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Introduction

From my experience of teaching literature at the college-level for 20 years, I could say the key of literature teaching is how to direct it, which means “how” to teach is as important as “what” to teach. By modifying my own experience, I would like to make a suggestion here on how to introduce Japanese literature to high school and middle-school students.

1. How to teach

Here are steps for how to direct students for experience in Japanese literature.

Step 1: Set an overall scheme to start with reality of students, read a literary work and return to reality of students.

Step 2: Direct reading by deemphasizing the remote and distant, focusing on the familiar, and introducing the unique and different.

Step 3: Guide students to learn from their discussion as well, through a reading map (guidance for how to read each literary work) and a discussion guideline. It is effective if both of them are given prior to their reading of a literary work. I find students have very low tolerance of ambiguity, and they want to have structure and guidance for their thought. Therefore it is very important and valuable to give a direction to go in. Simple maps and guidelines are good enough.

Step 4: Discuss what they discovered in the literary work, and how it can be applied to their real life issues.

Step 5: Guide students to make their discoveries concrete by writing them in a short paper, even 1-2 pages.

Step 6: Encourage students to develop their literary interest into other fields of study such as history, sociology, psychology, music and fine arts.

II. What to teach

First, today's young students seem to prefer short literary works.

Second, they love "visual and graphic" literary works. By "visual and graphic" they mean stories which are very descriptive in visual and graphic ways, even though authors use language instead of illustrations and photographs. Here are some good samples of these works:

Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965): "Tattooer," *Naomi (A Fool's Love)*, *The Key* and *Diary of a Mad Old Man*

Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927): "Rashomon," "In a Bamboo Grove" and "Hell Screen"

Yukio Mishima (1925-1970): "Patriotism"

Third, students enjoy literary works with subjects close to their reality with which they can easily associate themselves. Here is a list of literary works as such:

Yukio Mishima (1925-1970): *Confessions of a Mask* (awakening of homosexuality) and *The Sailor Who Fell from the Grace with the Sea* (coming of age in a parent's remarriage)

Haruki Murakami (1949-): *Norwegian Wood* (loss and sexuality), *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (fantasy/futuristic) and *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (alienation/loneliness)

Banana Yoshimoto (1964-): *Kitchen* (loss of close people) and *Tugumi* (loss of childhood)

Fourth, I would like to introduce *Musashi* by Eiji Yoshikawa (1892-1962) as an unexpectedly popular novel despite its length (970 pages long, Kodansha edition). This popularity might come from the fact that samurai have been a favorite exotic topic in the American culture. Also, because it was originally an *Asahi shinbun* newspaper series, each episode is short and absorbing. Not only that, the novel has a variety in topics such as coming of age, battle, fighting, romance and family issues. The story is well presented through character contrasts such as Musashi against Matahachi (his childhood friend) and Musashi against Kojiro (his show-off kind of rival). Overall it is also a superhero *Bildungsroman* which attracts young readers.

Finally, I also like to introduce Japanese literature in original for advanced-level language students. Paperbacks targeted to upper-level grade school and Junior-high school students in Japan such as follows are very suitable:

(1) “Aoitori bunko” series (published by Kodansha)

(2) “Popurasha bunko” series (by Popurasha)

With their variety in category from literary classic to casual contemporary stories, they are not only reasonably priced but also well-prepared with *furigana* which makes recognizing *kanji* much easier, and carefully designed to interest and encourage students for reading.

Conclusion

In today’s world where everything is so highly visualized, it is a great challenge for teachers to interest students into reading. However, by putting our emphasis on encouraging and helping them to visualize what is written, we may be able to train them how to enjoy literature even from different cultures.