Better Pass Boldly:  
Teaching Joyce in the EFL classroom  
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Abstract:
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This paper outlines the methodology, practice and outcomes of a ten week course teaching James Joyce’s short story, ‘The Dead’ to an intermediate-level class in Seisen University in Tokyo. An approach integrating the use of both “efferent” and “aesthetic” teaching methods is proposed as being the most productive way of engaging students, both linguistically and culturally. The former approach is concerned mainly with extracting information from the text. Activities would include cloze exercises, summaries, character maps and language analysis. The aesthetic approach, on the other hand, focuses the reader on her personal
relationship with the text and encourages parallels to be drawn with currents in her own life and society. Activities include keeping a response journal, text-prompted debates and rewriting narratives from different characters’ points of view. The liveliness and diversity of responses to these activities indicated a strength of imaginative and critical engagement that belied the daunting linguistic challenge of the story. By the end of the study period it was strongly felt that the course has the potential to encourage a significant improvement in student language and cultural competence.

Key words:
efferent reading, aesthetic reading, cultural competence, inference

Introduction

The teaching of literature in the EFL classroom, long a neglected or marginalised practice, has been undergoing something of a revival over the last couple of decades as has been appreciated by many in the EFL community (Brumfit & Carter, 1986; Kramsch, 1993; Lazar, 1993; Olson, Torrance & Hildyards, 1985). It is increasingly recognised that literature is not merely a tool for developing the written and oral skills of the students in a target language, although exposure to “authentic” multidimensional literary texts can certainly provide them with a greater intuitive awareness about language than they might acquire from standard classroom textbooks. Literature can also serve as a window into the culture of the target language, inviting a reader to navigate the semiotics of its created world - the thoughts and emotions of the characters, their customs, traditions and possessions, what clothes they wear, what music they listen to, how they make sense of their lives - in short, to develop what Hismanoglu calls a “cultural competence” in the reader (2006). Literature can also be useful in the language-learning process owing to the personal involvement it fosters in the reader. The students imaginatively engage with the characters and the main ideas of the text, and may be led to consider parallels with their own lives, which can promote lively and reflective oral and written responses (Hess, 2006).
Recent Studies

To briefly summarise recent studies. According to Collie and Slater (1990:3) there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement.

1. Valuable Authentic Material

Literature is authentic material which has not been created for the primary purpose of teaching a language. Other authentic samples of “real-life” language such as travel timetables, maps, newspaper or magazine articles are already used in classrooms, so literature can act as a beneficial complement to such materials, bringing students into contact with different, more sophisticated linguistic forms, communicative functions and meanings.

2. Cultural Enrichment

Though the world of a novel or play or short story is an imaginary one, it provides a detailed and imaginatively-evocative setting in which characters from many social and regional backgrounds can be described, their manners of interaction and governing drives as human agents. A reader can gain a feel for the codes and preoccupations that shape a real society through immersion in its literature’s cultural grammar.

3. Language Enrichment

Literature provides EFL learners with opportunities to learn about the syntax and discourse functions of sentences, the variety of possible structures and different ways of connecting ideas that are not readily available in standard “informational” texts. They encounter the figurative and daily use of language in dynamic, meaningful contexts and can thus improve their communicative and cultural competence.

4. Personal Involvement

Literature encourages a response in the learner which supersedes the linguistic concerns of the classroom - the emotional identification with the characters of a story and narrative draw towards a story’s climax can have beneficial effects on the whole language learning process, motivating a more meaningful
engagement with the language than that fostered with the utilitarian reality of the standard text.

Maley (1987) enumerates further and complementary virtues for learning English through literature. In sum:

1. Universality
Literature treats with central themes - Death, Love, Loss, Nature - that are common to all cultures.

2. Non-Triviality
Many of the more familiar forms of language teaching inputs tend to trivialize texts or experiences - literature does not “talk down”, it offers a rich source of authentic material over a wide range of registers.

3. Personal Relevance
Because it deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which either constitute part of the readers’ experience or which they can enter into imaginatively, they are able to relate it to their own lives.

4. Variety
Literature includes within it all conceivable varieties of the language, and all possible varieties of subject matter. Within literature we may find the language of law and mountaineering, of medicine and of bullfighting, of church sermons and nursery talk.

5. Interest
Literature deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting because they are part of the vast domain of human experience, and treats them in ways designed to compel the readers’ attention.

6. Economy and Suggestive Power
One of the great strengths of literature is its suggestive power. Even in its simplest forms it invites us to go beyond what is said to what is implies. Since it suggests much with few words, literature is ideal for generating language discussion. Maximum output can often be derived from minimum input.

7. Ambiguity
Because it is highly suggestive and associative, literature speaks subtly and
delivers different meanings to different people. In teaching, this has two advantages. The first is that each learner’s interpretation has validity within limits. The second is that an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion is available since each person’s perception is different. That no two readers will have a completely convergent interpretation establishes the tension that is necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas. This last point in particular fed into the choice of that consummately ambiguous text, “The Dead” for use in an EFL course on Irish Literature.

A useful distinction has been drawn between two main approaches to teaching literature - what L.M. Rosenblatt terms “efferent” reading and “aesthetic” reading (1975). The former is largely concerned with what might be called the nuts and bolts of reader response, where the emphasis is to extract information from the text. Efferent tasks involve analyses of plot, character, setting, theme and literary style. Activities would include cloze/gap-filling, summarising, story frames and character maps. The aesthetic approach, on the other hand, focuses the reader’s attention on “the lived-through experience of reading.” Readers concentrate on their personal relationships with the text, the feelings and sympathies evoked with the characters, and are encouraged to think critically about their own lives and social milieu. Activities include keeping a reader response journal, letter-writing, text-prompted debates and rewriting narratives from different characters’ points of view. It was felt that an integrated use of these two approaches, beginning with the former and building towards the latter, would be the most effective way to go about teaching James Joyce’s thematically and emotionally rich short story, “The Dead”. This paper suggests strategies and outcomes of applying efferent and aesthetic methods to teaching this story to a class of 25 Japanese female EFL students of levels ranging from medium to high intermediate.
Content

‘The Dead’ module formed a 10-week section of a course introducing Irish literature to a class of 25 third-year English majors in a Tokyo Women’s college. The level of English varied roughly from TOEIC scores of 450 to 700. Initial questionnaires confirmed that almost all of the students were unfamiliar with Irish Literature (one was aware that the writer Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo) was of partially Irish background). Moreover, a large majority were somewhat trepidatious about reading literary texts for these main reasons: the top-down, “right answer” approach they’d experienced in High School; their perceived lack of vocabulary and the intimidating distance they feel classical literature to be from their lives. One of the main goals of the teacher, then, was to help the students unlearn their previous attitudes, work with them to recapture (or capture in the first place) their sense of enjoyment in literature by encouraging them to vicariously inhabit literary lives and connect them to their own thoughts and experiences.

“The Dead”, while far from being as stylistically experimental as Joyce’s later works does present a daunting linguistic challenge for even the most advanced students. This was partially offset by the fact that the story was made into a film by John Huston, which provided a useful complement, shown in ten minute clips at the end of each lesson. While undeniably “difficult”, it is one of the most beautifully executed short stories in the English language, and one of the more accessible works of Ireland’s most recognised author. Certainly, the plot is not labyrinthine. Accompanied by his wife Gretta, University teacher and writer Gabriel Conroy attends the annual Christmastime party of his elderly aunts Kate and Julia and their niece, Mary Jane. It is a grand occasion, but Gabriel, something of a cosmopolitan intellectual, feels uneasy among the other guests and has awkward encounters with the housemaid, Lily, and Miss Ivors, a self-righteously nationalistic college friend. Back at the hotel after the party, his amorous mood towards his wife dissolves when he learns of a passionate love she’d had in her youth for a young man who subsequently died. Gabriel dismally realises “how poor a role he, her husband, had played in her
life” (p.199), and reflects on the nature of love and memory and death. The pace is slow and the mood subtle, by turns sombre and elegiac - the students responded keenly to the changes in emotional register. “The Dead” is also a vivid document of a time when Ireland was at a crossroads of history and culture, wrought by questions of identity and purpose - a society which in some ways parallels contemporary post-bubble Japan.

Another strong reason for choosing this story is the fact that its famous conclusion, with Gabriel’s vision of the snow falling over all Ireland and metaphorically throughout the universe - is purposely ambivalent. The snow may signify a shroud of death covering the country, or may represent renewal, cleansing, a rejuvenated way of life. There is no “correct” answer or interpretation, although most recent critics tend to plump for a more benevolent authorial intent. This ambivalence may have the benign effect of acting as an antidote to the more prescriptive approach to literary analysis the students are used to from their High School days.

Course activities

One of the stated objectives of the course was to introduce students to the historical and cultural backgrounds of Irish literary works. To this end, the course was begun with a questionnaire encouraging students to guess at some of the concurrences between Meiji Japan and turn-of-the-century Ireland and to situate the story in its cultural time (see further below in the list of activities).

Each class, with occasional variations allowed due to discussion tangents, followed the same pattern. The first 15 minutes was given to group review of research homework, with a discussion of general findings. The next 20 minutes involved students reading aloud in turn a few sentences each, from sections of the text. Explanations of vocabulary or cultural points were induced or given. The remainder of the class was devoted to efferent and/or aesthetic activities, group discussions and watching a few minutes of the part of the film relevant to class readings.
**Class practice**

The class was divided into groups of four, and each partner allotted a research task to be written in a notebook, roles to be changed from week to week. The activities were selected to balance linguistic practice with cultural contextualizing.

A. **Summary.** The student writes (and reads out to her group) a 150 to 200 word summary of the reading pages covered in the preceding week, with three comprehension questions, to be answered by the other students.

B. **Cultural/Historical point.** The student picks out one or two cultural or physical details that are very similar or very different to the fabric of contemporary life - to do with clothing, say, or transport or household life or social activities. For example, having maids, travelling by horse and carriage, ‘performing’ at social gatherings.

C. **Interesting Quote.** The student is asked to select a quote that made a strong impression and then explain its significance. The maid Lily’s acerbic retort “The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you.” (p.162) usually provoked lively comments. Also Gabriel’s “Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age” (p.200).

D. **Vocabulary.** Students choose (or are assigned by teacher) five new words from the readings and put them in sentences of their own making, then explain these to the group.

Students were also required to keep separate journals in which to write logs of their responses to readings as well as various efferent and aesthetic writing exercises. The following are examples of some of these exercises I set during the course.

- Imagine Michael Foley survived and Gretta married him. Write a short essay from Gretta’s point of view imagining how your life would be different.

- Write first-person accounts of Gretta’s and Gabriel’s imagined trip to Galway together after the action of this story finishes.
Movie poster design: Design a poster (ignoring the existing one) which includes a drawing of a key scene in the story, a selection of contemporary actors you believe would be appropriate for the main characters and a “blurb” phrase which encapsulates the main drama of the narrative - for example “She could never forget that cold, rainy night in Galway!”

Materials

What follows is a selection of some of the efferent and aesthetic activities used over the course:

**Sheet 1: Irish and Japanese Societies**

Irish and Japanese Societies at the Opening of the Last Century.

Read each sentence and decide whether you think it’s True or False. Guess if you’re not sure!

1. Ireland was governed by the British Parliament as a part of the United Kingdom. (T/F)
2. Tokugawa Ieyasu was ruler of Japan. (T/F)
3. There was a giant earthquake in Tokyo. (T/F)
4. Women could vote in Japan and Ireland. (T/F)
5. Tuberculosis was a major cause of death in both Ireland and Japan. (T/F)
6. Irish was the main language spoken by most people at the time. (T/F)
7. Dublin had Europe’s largest ‘Red Light District’ at the time, while Tokyo had Asia’s biggest one. (T/F)
8. Japan had just successfully fought a war against a major European country. (T/F)
9. There was only a small gap between rich and poor in Ireland and Japan. (T/F)
10. The car, radio, airplane, movie, music player, lightbulb, television, camera and typewriter were all invented in the decade around the turn of the century. (T/F)
11. A famous Irish writer lived in Japan and wrote about Japanese folklore and legends. (T/F)

Cultural oddities - try and guess if these statements are True or not.

12. There are no snakes in Ireland - Saint Patrick chased them out.
13. In strict Catholic Ireland of the 1950s, many young women were told to bring telephone books and balloons to local dances to protect against ‘sin’.
14. At traditional Irish funerals, heavy drinking and dancing are customary to ‘celebrate’ the spirit of the dead relative.
15. Traffic accidents are caused each year in Ireland by the custom of drivers ‘crossing themselves’ as they pass churches and losing control of their vehicles.

Sheet 2: How to Read ‘The Dead’

“HELP!” This will most likely be your first reaction to Joyce’s writing. The style is literary, the vocabulary wide and unfamiliar, the social setting is in a European city over a century ago. How can this have any connection to your life? Don’t panic! One of the main purposes of this course is to help you practice reading for ‘gist’ - that is, general meaning - rather than try to understand every word, which is unnecessary. Read the first two paragraphs without looking at your dictionary. Who are the characters mentioned? What is the occasion and where is it taking place? Who is giving the party? Are many people attending it? What does Lily’s job seem to be? Now read the first sentence again. “Lily...was literally run off her feet.” Can you guess what this idiom might mean, from the context? This is a very important language skill we will be focusing on in this class. Rather than stop every time you meet an unknown word - which will be often! - read around the word and try to work out its meaning from the context. Gradually, your skill at doing this will improve.

There will also be a cultural focus in this course, on the thoughts and
emotions of the characters, their customs and traditions, what clothes they wear, what music they listen to, how they make sense of their lives. Are there any similarities with your own life and culture?

Here’s what we’re going to do each week:

In groups of four, each partner is given a research task to be written in their notebook.

A) Write a summary of the reading pages covered in the preceding week plus 3 or 4 comprehension questions.

B) Choose a cultural or historical point that is very different or very similar to life today (for example, clothes, house decoration, transport).

C) Choose an interesting quote and explain it.

D) Choose five new words from the story, put them into your own sentences and explain them to your group members.

The roles of A, B, C and D will switch each week.

Sheet 3: The Dead

For the first part of this course we will be reading ‘The Dead’, a famous short story by Ireland’s most famous writer, James Joyce (1882-1941). Set in the early 1900s, it provides a sharp view of middle-class life in Dublin at a time of great change in Ireland. From the title, we might expect this story to take place in a funeral parlour or graveyard, however we begin with the main character Gabriel Conroy and his wife, Gretta, attending the annual dancing party hosted by his two ageing aunts, Julia and Kate Morkan and their niece, Mary Jane. At the party, Gabriel experiences some uncomfortable confrontations. He makes a personal comment to Lily, the housemaid, that provokes a sharp reply, and during a dance he is irritated by the teasing of his partner, Miss Ivors. Finally, Gabriel sees Gretta’s emotional response to a song sung at the end of the party. Later, he learns that she was thinking of a former
lover who had died ‘for her’. He sadly contemplates his life as the snow falls outside his hotel window.

Questions

1. Where does the story take place?

2. Who are the main characters?

3. When is the story set?

4. Write down as many words as you can that are associated with ‘dead’ - for example, synonyms, collocations. Use your dictionary!

**Sheet 4: Comprehension multiple choice**

1. Aunts Kate and Julia are worried at the beginning of the story because:
   a) Gabriel and his wife are late
   b) Freddie Malins may turn up “screwed”
   c) both of the above

2. Lily’s opinion of men these days is that:
   a) she wants to marry her boyfriend
   b) they are full of empty promises
   c) they are well-dressed and rich

3. Gabriel gives Lily money because:
   a) he is embarrassed by her comment
   b) it’s Christmas
   c) she did a good job helping him with his coat and shoes

4. Gabriel feels nervous and uncomfortable because of:
   a) the speech he has to give
   b) his awkward conversation with Lily
   c) both of the above
5. How is Gretta’s attitude to bad weather different from her husband’s?
   a) she feels more natural and relaxed in nature
   b) she prefers snow to sunshine
   c) she prefers Continental galoshes to Irish ones

6. How do we know that Freddy Malins is drunk?
   a) he failed the test for his pilot’s license
   b) he dances wildly to Mary Jane’s piano recital
   c) he cannot walk steadily on his own

7. Miss Ivors accuses Gabriel of being a “West Briton” because:
   a) he writes for a pro-British newspaper
   b) he prefers to go on holiday in Europe rather than in Ireland
   c) both of the above

8. Which words best describe Gabriel?
   a) self-obsessed and irritable
   b) cheerful and fun-loving
   c) generous and easy-going

9. The main form of entertainment at the party seems to be:
   a) drinking and arguing
   b) listening to old ladies’ stories about Scotland
   c) music and dancing

10. The line “He’s not so bad, is he?” refers to:
    a) Gabriel’s dancing
    b) Mr. Browne’s jokes
    c) Freddie’s drunkenness

Score out of 10?
Sheet 5: Nationalism

Are you a Gabriel or a Miss Ivors?
Which of the following statements do you agree with? Be prepared to give reasons!

Agree/Disagree/Not sure

For Japanese people:
1. It is preferable to holiday in Japan rather than abroad.

2. It is necessary to master Japanese before studying foreign languages such as English.

3. All children should study traditional Japanese arts.

4. Children at school or public events should be made to sing the Kimigayo and stand for the Hinomaru.

5. Teachers who refuse to do these should be punished.

6. People should watch Japanese TV programmes instead of imported foreign ones (even if they’re boring!).

7. It is more important to be an international citizen than to live comfortably as a Japanese person in Japan.

In groups of three, discuss these statements and your responses. Do you think your answers would be different according to gender or generation? Which statement was most controversial or thought-provoking?

In groups of 4, teams of two, choose one of these topics for a short debate, 3 minutes each speaker.
Sheet 6: The Lass of Aughrim

If you’ll be the Lass of Aughrim
As I take you to be
Tell me that first token
That passed between you and me

Oh don’t you remember
That night on yon lean hill
When we both met together
I am sorry now to tell

Oh the rain falls on my yellow locks
And the dew soaks my skin
My babe lies cold in my arms:
Lord Gregory let me in

Oh the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew soaks my skin:
My babe lies cold in my arms
But no-one will let me in.

This is a traditional Irish folk song about the doomed love affair between a poor country girl - the lass of Aughrim - and the local aristocrat, Lord Gregory.

- What is the tone of this song?
- What words or details suggest this tone?
- Why do you think Gretta is so moved by this song?
- Who would you prefer as a boyfriend/husband, Michael Furey or Gabriel? Why?

In groups of 4, teams of two, debate the following topic, a quote attributed to a model from China last year: “It is better to be crying in a BMW than
laughing on a bicycle.” (i.e. Better to be rich, but unhappy, than poor and happy).

Sheet 7: Epiphany - plus aesthetic activity: write a haiku about an epiphany you had.

What is an Epiphany?

Each of Joyce’s 15 short stories in ‘Dubliners’ concludes with an epiphany by the main character. Originally a religious idea, an epiphany is a sudden moment of realisation, a flash of recognition in which someone or something is seen in a new light. All at once we understand the whole picture. The truth stands revealed. Eureka! Yatto satorimashita!

This moment of sudden realisation, an opening of the third eye, can also be found in Japanese Haiku poetry and Zen Buddhism. There are many examples of epiphany in literature, but James Joyce is credited with first having used the word in relation to his writing.

What are some everyday examples of epiphany?

The time a child discovers that Santa Claus is, in reality, her father or mother is usually quite epiphanic!

The first time you hear a particularly moving or powerful piece of music can provide an epiphany, as can a new experience while travelling.

Here’s another example. A girl is madly in love with a boy who does not love her, but she is so blinded by her love that no matter what her friends say to warn her about him she will not listen. She continues to be with him, hoping he will change. Then, one day when they’re at a party together and he’s outrageously flirting with a waitress, she has an epiphany - a sudden realisation that he doesn’t love her, he’s never going to change, the relationship is dead. She walks out on him.

Can you think of any other everyday examples of epiphany?

Write a short essay about an epiphany you had, and how it changed your life.
Outcomes

Some of these activities worked more smoothly than others. The politically controversial aspect of many of the “Nationalism” sheet statements escaped many of the students, as did the requirement that they reflect on the gender-based or generational dimension of their answers. The loaded issue of whether or not national symbols should be “respected” in schools was, perhaps understandably, met with serene indifference, though a discussion of what properly constituted an “international person” brought forth interesting answers. The topic of whether the Japanese language should be mastered before any introduction of English into the classroom was also popular, and these were the two debate topics we ended up focusing on.

As mentioned in one of the first handouts, one of the main concerns of this course was to encourage students to read for ‘gist’, to infer possible meanings of words from their surrounding context, a crucial language skill which enables a student to navigate their unfamiliar linguistic milieu with more confidence. This was particularly difficult for many students as the notion of hazarding a guess, however educated, runs counter to the grain of much of the right answer/wrong answer language learning they had hitherto experienced. A way to forestall the inevitable lunge towards the electronic dictionary was to focus on examples of familiar language used in unfamiliar ways and in unfamiliar contexts, thus encouraging greater linguistic flexibility.

Early in the party, Gabriel is assisting a drunk and unsteady Freddie towards the bathroom - “..Gabriel could be seen piloting Freddie Malins across the landing.” (p.167) This literary use of a commonly known functional term provides a vivid image of the scene for students. Other examples of such obscured known language which students were invited to guess at the meaning of:

“He’s not so bad, is he?” (p.168) asked an anxious Aunt Kate to Gabriel of the feared uproariously drunk Freddie shortly after the above scene.

“I was great with him at the time.” (p.198) says Greta, looking back on the unspoken love she had for the unfortunate Michael Furey.
“One by one they were all becoming *shades.*” (p.200) ponders Gabriel at the end of the story as he thinks of Michael Furey, Patrick Morkan and his moribund Aunt Julia.

In one of the first classes the students had been asked to consider the possible figurative meanings of the word “dead”, and look up its collocations in a dictionary - e.g. dead body, living dead, brain dead, dead right, dead end etc. In the story, there are many literal applications of the term - Michael Furey is dead, as are most of the people talked about around the Christmas table with their memories evoked in Gabriel’s speech. His elderly aunts will soon be among their number, he muses. The concept as metaphor also ramifies throughout the story - who or what else may be dead? Gabriel’s and Gretta’s marriage? Gabriel’s soul itself? The genteel society of antimacassars and music recitals? The romantic phantasm of an “authentic” Ireland? Using these discussion questions as starting points, the students were finally asked to write short essays about what they thought was “dead” in today’s Japan.

This question provoked some thoughtful responses. One student wrote about the self-interested behaviour of the nuclear village in the aftermath of the Fukushima crisis. Another about the death of J-pop in the face of the Korean wave. Bereaved cultural artefacts included the practice of the fine arts, the custom of letter-writing and communication ability in general, while others mentioned respect for the elderly and trust in government as reflected in the voting turnout amongst the young generation. The diversity of responses indicated that the students, once they had overcome their initial apprehension about the difficulty of the language and relevance of the story, were able to engage imaginatively with Joyce’s world of over a century ago and draw analogies with their own, use it as a means of thinking critically about their own society in the twenty-first century on the other side of the world.
References


