

Function of Story: In Relation with Text-Based Methodology

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February 18th to 20th, 2011, marked a beginning of a new epoch for us at the Institute of Socio-Arts and Sciences, the University of Tokushima. We had the honor of having two distinguished academics for our Faculty Development Workshop of Foreign Language Teaching; one was Professor Dr. Peter Mickan from the University of Adelaide and the other was Professor Dr. Yong-min Kim from Daegu National University of Education. The following essay is inspired by these two academics' exciting and stimulating presentation.

Literature: A whole entity of stories

It is a pity that today literature seems to be treated as a kind of useless thing in any country in any culture as economics and technologies are directly influential on our lives. Except for some people endowed with literary talents, truly enough, most people cannot live by having a vocation of the art of literature. Even in our own university, the aim of research has been shifted to a more socially appealing one in cooperation with profit-oriented companies at large. We are apt to be pressed for immediate results and required to evaluate our study and research on rather specific scales as in scientific fields. As a student of literary study, I often find myself getting lost in this far economically advanced situation of today.

Is literature really so useless in our world? That is a simple question. If literature would be useless, it would not have been in existence. *Usefulness* and *useless* should be considered in relation with the lapse of time. Even if something would seem to be *useless* now, it might be *useful* after a long while later. Perhaps there would be nothing *useless* as far as we human beings are concerned with the things around us. When we just take a different view on literature, we may get an interesting perspective in terms of literature.

The word *Literature* might be a bit abstract and forbidding for most people who are not interested in it at all. They tend to treat it as a mold-covered, old-fashioned thing, quite away from our daily lives. They even treat it as a thing that only girls and women should have a bit of knowledge about it as part of their education. In the ordinary case for most people, literature is an artistic story, a highly elaborated artistic piece, and a little difficult to understand. But just think about it in another way; suppose we take it as a whole entity of stories composed of texts. If we only look around us, we will find that we are surrounded by various kinds of stories. Everything that is recognized and perceived through our faculty of perception innate in us is regarded in

terms of a story. From a philosophical point of view our life is in itself a story we weave each day from birth till death. Our day is a story from the time we wake till we go to bed. We talk with a friend telling or listening to something about each other. We watch TV programs, dramas, movies, and read books, comics, pamphlets, e-mails, information on the Internet, and newspapers; they are all stories deliberately constructed with texts. Even visual media are basically made from written stories composed of texts, like a scenario.

We are not so conscious of the fact that we are surrounded by stories and looking for stories about something interesting, and most probably unusual. We are, in a sense, almost always passive listeners to a story told by someone who is eager to tell something unusual to us. He, the teller, surely enough, uses texts of words to construct a world of his own. And reversely when we want to talk to someone, we certainly think about, in what way we should tell others what we most want to tell most effectually.

Then, a story is a complex of texts of words with a beginning and an end: a story must begin with a word, then a text and proceed on with more intricate texts describing an unusual event or events in the meantime, and reaching a climax somehow dissolves quietly into an end with an impressive text and a word and a full stop. As Jonathan Culler aptly alludes to one of the functions of stories, we grasp the meaning of an event by telling a story: "We make sense of events through possible stories" (Culler, 2000, p. 82).

When we think of telling a story to someone, we most surely organize a sequence of events most appropriate for what we want to tell others. With the aid of our faculty of imagination and usage of language, we will try to find the most impressive and effective words to begin with. Along with that, we search for a narrative technique unconsciously suitable for telling what we have to tell. Narrative techniques are, in a sense, established and finely fixed ways of presenting something to others.

Telling a story with texts is, therefore, approximately a way of grasping an actuality of things around us. By telling something about us, we have to know our self, for instance, answering the questions: *What am I? How have I come to be? Where will I go hereafter? How should I get along with others? What do others think of me?* We will face all these complicated and unsolvable questions. We will, then, try to find some answers using words which are necessarily texts that would make sense.

The function of literature

I believe that the most important and greatest function of literature is to liberate us from established ideology in our society, to make our mind open to everything without any prejudice. *Literature*, a rather abstract noun for artistically refined stories, is a world of imagination created by words. We human beings are animals endowed with the faculty of using language. And with

this, we should have it in mind that we use language with the faculty of imagination, which is intrinsic aspect of the use of language.

We use our imagination, which is the greatest attribute of human being along with the use of words, to enter a world of well-constructed and organized texts. If we know the language of the texts, we will go into the world of that language. We are free to go into any kind of the world of any language; there is no border in literature. Reading a literary work, a story, by the aid of imagination, we can be in America, in Australia, in China, in Korea, on the moon, in the galaxy far away from our planet, or in any place of any time; we can also be anybody; Romeo, Juliet, Terminator, Astro Boy, Ninja, and any other hero or heroine. That will be the most fascinating aspect of the artistic entity of literature. Through a highly artistic piece of literary work, we will know everything about others and also ourselves in any language and in any culture by working our faculty of imagination via texts.

Literature in class and outside class

With the limit of knowledge and vocabulary along with the guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology in Japan, it might be rather difficult to use, directly, a fine piece of material from literature in class at junior and high school level. Students at any level are, however, intellectually eager to know something outside class activities, if they are well stimulated and oriented by the teacher and his or her organized materials in class. Even a well-known simple fairy tale in the original language and form, not a retold one, nor a simplified one of limited vocabulary, would be an opening to a new world for them. A story is a whole set of texts calculated and arranged in *context*. Reading a story is, therefore, to open your mind to the intended layout of texts and to find a meaning or message woven by the texts along a story line. This includes finding imagery, metaphor, and other literary devices in a simple way. Reading a story is, again, to meet with every aspect of language used by people in living; dialogues, monologues most commonly used by them, and description of situations, along with fundamental elements of grammatical usage. We have to remember that even a simple fundamental grammar item would be a key to understand the framework of a story and lead to a profound interpretation.

Children are fond of stories. We were once children and begged our mothers to tell a story or to read a story from a book. We teachers are, in a sense, Scheherazade of *Arabian Nights* telling stories for a thousand and one nights. Class activities are stories, which should be organized and well-constructed with meanings and messages, and surprises for children full of curiosity to know something unusual.

Literature, when we just have a little different view on it, seems to begin to wear a new aspect. It is intellectually a dynamic and fascinating entity quite *useful* in our daily life. Even video games and comics, which children and even grown-ups are crazy about, are essentially based

on written texts that are programming language in *context*.

Literary works seem to have a vast potentiality in exploring students' intellectual perspectives if it is exploited and utilized effectively. As I have pointed out before that one of the functions of literature is to liberate our mind, we are free to enter any world of any dimension in any culture through language of any kind. With this in mind, we can invite students to launch an exciting voyage into a vast world of *texts* full of new discoveries.

References

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宮崎隆義 「英語教育における「物語」の活用例として—「物語」の意味付けとハーディの短篇分析例」『英語教育への新たな挑戦—英語教師の視点から—』英宝社 2010.