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# Attitudes and Benefits: Japanese Students Learning Hungarian in a Literary Workshop

ハンガリー語を学ぶ日本人学習者の文学教材に対する反応と効果

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## Abstract

Literary texts were no longer used in foreign-language classroom settings, once the grammar-translation method was excluded through other foreign-language teaching methods. These texts recovered significance several decades later in more advanced forms through communicative-language teaching methods. There are positive and negative aspects to using authentic literary text in the second language classroom context, but many language learners find associated benefits. Among the numerous positive aspects, the most important is that literature is authentic text. The use of it helps students gain important linguistic, cultural and personal insight into the language to learn.

Keywords: Literature in foreign language teaching, short stories, dramatization, learner attitudes

## 1. Introduction

Many believe that literature is the most interesting manifestation of the language. Literature may contain vocabulary, structures, social values, and ideas that may not necessarily appear in everyday communication. However, these concepts transmit valuable cultural and linguistic information to learners of a target language. Despite all the advantages presented by literature, it is still not used as integral part of second-language classroom education. Proper methodological approaches also are scarce. In addition, both teachers and learners may fear entering the ambiguous field of working with literary texts. Teachers sometimes commit the mistake of applying the same literature teaching methodology used with native speakers when educating second-language learners. Learners may preconceive literature as something difficult or boring because they may not read literature even in their mother tongue.

When literature is used to teach and learn a second language according to the special needs of learners, it can become highly beneficial. Learners and teachers may perceive it as enjoyable and motivating. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (2001) determined that the foreign language learner was a cultural mediator. Language learners have the fundamental capacity to study a literary text with the objective of configuring a series of cognitive

strategies that enable them to understand the culture of the target language represented in the literary text. (Núñez Puente 2008)

The present paper is divided into three parts. The first provides a short historical review of role of literature in foreign language teaching. The second discusses the results of a research conducted on the benefits of using literary texts in foreign language classroom. The third is based on analysis of written feedback of Hungarian as a foreign language learners on their attitude towards literature in classroom.

## **2. Short historical overview: Literary texts in second-language classroom context**

Foreign language teaching is framed by the social and political context in which the language is taught. Thus, language teaching methods vary based the points, tools and skills used for emphasis during the learning and teaching processes.

The first modern foreign-language teaching method was developed the by the end of the 19th century, and was still extant in the 20th century grammar-translation method, which was invented for teaching Latin and Classical Greek. At that time, language teaching was solely designed to cultivate learners to understand literary texts and forms. This method exclusively used examples of literary texts throughout the learning progress. Literary texts served as the basis for explaining and practicing grammar, while reading and writing skills were established by answering comprehension questions related to the given literary text. In the correspondent social context, communication as goal was considered irrelevant; teaching focused exclusively on written texts (Acquarone 2007: 49). In short, instead of being limited to a complementary role, literary texts formed the basis of the foreign-language education.

The direct method was established at the beginning of the 20th century to improve upon the grammar-translation method. The direct method is one of the most extended among the so-called natural methods. The natural methods were developed based on the conviction that first and second-language acquisition occur in the same way. In this sense the natural methods were the first attempt to construct a language-teaching method based on first language acquisition observations. The natural method was introduced in France and Germany at the beginning of the 20th century before spreading to the United States (CVC Diccionario). Such methods were limited to teaching spoken language. At that time the effective oral communication was important in several fields. The literary texts were completely suppressed since they were considered impractical because they did not represent everyday language. (Kovács 2013)

After the Second World War, when psychology dominated structuralism and the behaviorism shaped foreign language education, the field was finally open toward the structural-global method.

This method focused on teaching and acquiring structures by repeating strongly model-like dialogues (Acquaroni 2007: 49). Literature was still considered separate because many followers of the method believed that literary structures did not represent the real language. (Stembert 2009)

Communicative methodologies of the 1970s have stressed the importance of using authentic materials and activities in the classroom to help students achieve communicative competence that would enable them to use language for communicative purposes in real situations. This new method slightly altered the use of literature in the foreign-language teaching. Parallel to the diversification and deepening of the communicative teaching method, literary texts were extended in academic use. The kinds of texts used in the communicative language learning were originally limited to those with a communicative message. The attempt of teaching speech acts influenced the choice of texts. Later, as speech acts do not work without a deeper knowledge of the target culture, the communicative methods integrated literary texts in teaching Culture with capital letter to facilitate learners in reaching the highest echelons of the target culture (Miquel, Sans 2004). In the 1990s, literature was used in a different role in the classroom. It was used to transmit social and cultural values, meaning that the content was emphasized, while literary forms were ignored. Language learning also entails the acquisition of culture relevant to the target language. Literary competence finally emerged at the beginning of the 21st century. This event supposed that learners must gain the capacity to understand and enjoy both literary forms and tools. Because of this new approach, language textbooks (apart from the functional texts helping learners to survive in everyday situations) also presented literary texts in different forms and genres. (Núñez 2009) The literary text thus became an important source of input of cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Despite of the need of teaching literature in second-language classroom, few internationally appreciated authors are engaged in research. This includes Gillian Lazar (1993; 2003) and co-authors Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater (1987) in the field of English as foreign language, Rosana Acquaroni (2007) (who introduced a new vision of literature in the second language classroom) in the field of Spanish as a foreign language. Unfortunately, there is no specific curriculum for literature in Hungarian as a foreign language. There have been few attempts (Kovács 2014; Kovács, Walsch Mester 2018), none of which have never been gathered into a comprehensive volume.

### **3. Reasons for using literature in second language classroom**

As the previous section described, only a few comprehensive handbooks exist for teaching literature in second-language classroom. This creates a paradox when observing the quantity of studies that prove the benefits of using literature in the second-language classroom setting. Researchers agree on some of the relevant keypoints.

### **3.1 Literature is authentic text**

One of the main reasons that literature is recommended for use in the language classroom is that it is authentic text. That means it has been created by a native speaker for native speakers without any didactic intentions. Current coursebooks already promote language acquisition by using a wide range of authentic samples of language, including timetables, pamphlets, city maps. However, literature has the additional value of offering a wider range of linguistic uses in addition to highlighting the expressive and poetic functions of language. (Collie & Slater 1987) Literature is also a kind of authentic text that is read for pleasure. This also promotes learner motivation and engagement. According to Nutall (1982) reading is a process during which the reader extracts the meaning of the text in order to achieve a goal. This includes facts, information, ideas or enjoyment. This means that the real reason of reading is atypically related to language learning; this is usually true for language learners, as well. (Nutall 1982: 3,4,19; in Albaladejo Gracia 2007)

### **3.2 Literature favors the creative and imaginative use of language**

In most cases, average second-language handbooks are limited to teaching the referential function of language. This does not enable language learners to develop the important skill of „thinking in the target language”. For other words, learners do not acquire target language’s metaphoric system, which is essential for interpreting and understanding different meanings that do not appear literally, for example irony, sarcasm or other intended messages „between the lines” (Daskalovska, Dimova 2012).

Creativity is an omnipresent phenomenon not only in literature but in everyday language use. On a linguistic level, it is present in idioms, metaphors and proverbs. Creativity in communication can be found in advertisements, on road signs, and in newspaper articles. Morphology and, even more underlined in the literature, verbal creativity involve constant interaction. The acquisition of creative constructions helps learners to understand these different levels. Literary texts can thus help students develop their skills to discover metaphoric or figurative language in everyday communication.

Literary texts are also characterised by linguistic richness on both structure and vocabulary. These promote learner understanding of the target language and familiarize them with less- frequent linguistic forms (Albaladejo García 2007).

### **3.3 Literature offers a wide range of themes**

Literature generally deals with universally known topics such as love, a sense of life, ageing, childhood, family and nature. These concepts facilitate students in understanding the texts. Moreover, language teachers reasonably assume that learners have previous knowledge and experiences in these

areas (Moyano 2008). Such topics are rarely present in coursebooks designed to teach students to converse in everyday situations. Literature is thus a tool that can provide access to questions that may be less practical, but that are equally as important.

### **3.4 Literature actively involves learners**

Active learner involvement can be achieved through a variety of literary topics. These topics may motivate learners to evaluate, express personal opinion, and initiate discussion when the topic itself is open to interpretation. On the other hand, literature promotes linguistic education. When reading literary texts, learners actively interpret information through critical analysis, by negotiating connotations, looking for different meanings, activating their imaginations, and using previous knowledge. (Daskalovska et al 2012) These mental activities have powerful effects on the memory and contribute to language acquisition (Carter and McCarthy 1988: 65).

### **3.5 Literature involves extensive reading**

Extensive reading is beneficial for language acquisition. First, it increases learner exposure to the target language which facilitates acquisition of the target language. Longer authentic texts often involve diverse structures and vocabulary in the target language. In addition, the variety of contexts and combinations help learners create their own mental maps of the associated meanings. Readers will confront diverse vocabulary during extensive reading, which increases their knowledge. In this way, linguistic forms and connotations are reinforced.

Extensive reading consolidates previously acquired language and can improve foreign-language writing and speaking skills. Exposure to longer texts enhances learner confidence with other extended texts. (Bell 1998)

### **3.6 The overall goal**

In addition to the many benefits of using literature in language acquisition, its other values must be mentioned. The use of literature in the foreign-language classroom motivates learners to continue reading, provides them with cultural information, and teaches the correct approach to other literary texts outside the classroom.

## **4. Literature in Hungarian as a foreign language classroom**

Since 2017, an optional summer term subject titled Short novel dramatization has been offered by the Hungarian Department of the Graduate School of Language and Culture (Osaka University). This class involves a framework to teach students how to convert a prose into a theater piece. Apart

from the belief that literature in second language positively effects language learning, the subject's primary motivation is the preparation of a theater piece to be performed at the faculty's annual theater festival (typically held in November).

The short novel genre is chosen in this context because of its length. Students may already be circumspect in approaching literature (Iriarte Vaño 2009), so a 2-3 page text can be both comforting and motivating. Students with less self-confidence in reading literary texts require physical awareness that such stories have beginnings, middles and ends (McNabb 2013).

Participants are generally third or fourth-grade students with proficiency in Hungarian suitable for understanding linguistically and stylistically more complex texts. The average number of participants is between 14-20, meaning that approximately 7-10 working pairs can be created by the professor. During the course (15 lessons, each 90 minutes) paired students, under the supervision of a professor, dramatize the literary text (already fragmented by the professor). The decision which texts to dramatize occurs by voting for one of three by the professor offered short stories. This method appears gratifying as students feel they have agency in the dramatizing project. According to the author's observations students tend to choose humorous stories containing situation comedy.

After the short story is chosen the professor prepares the fragments with varying activities (oral or written ones, play activities) whose aim is to make students enter into interaction with the text and understand correctly the vocabulary with all its meanings and connotations. The activities are planned in such way that at the end of the day the literary text becomes an occasion to express opinion, to activate previous knowledge or to wake up personal memories; in other words literature converts into the tool of learning instead of being its explicit goal. After completing the related activities students begin to prepare the dramatized version of each fragments: they are free to add characters or modify the story in order to express the plot by means of dialogues. They are encouraged to use the acquired vocabulary as well. After finishing the dramatization, students complete the theater piece with instructions and short descriptions of the characters. Professor acts during the dramatization as facilitator: provides information on the short story's author, prepares the fragments, corrects the scenes and gives feedbacks to students.

To sum up the dramatization is a complex process which requires hard work from both learners and teachers.

## **5. Student feedback and attitudes**

### **5.1 The corpus**

The present paper analyzed a corpus of 26 texts that were collected during the summer terms of the 2017/18 and 2018/19 academic years. The closing activity of the Short novel dramatization

course of both terms consisted in an individual essay in which students were required to express their thoughts on the following questions:

- A. What did you learn about the author?
- B. Recall the plot briefly.
- C. Which words and expressions did you find useful and worth memorizing in the short story?
- D. Did you recall any personal stories while reading? If so, please describe them here.
- E. Did you like the story? What did you like the most about it?

These questions allow the teacher to observe several points regarding students' attitudes and evaluation concerning the subject. First, questions B and C help the professor determine students' proficiency in acquiring vocabulary from the short story. When answering the question B, students must use newly learnt vocabulary to recount the plot. In question C, students are asked to reflect on the learning process, thereby stressing the importance of individual-personal language learning.

Second, the questions D and E ascertain students' personal engagement with the short story. Question D highlights the dialogue between the text and the reader as a result of a successful engagement. Question E coincide with the question D in the sense of personal engagement, but primarily focuses on student's capacity to express individual evaluation.

Finally, question A determines whether students are able to place the author in the context of the Hungarian culture.

In the summer term of 2017/2018, course participants decided on the short story titled *My mother's first cake*, written by the male writer Krisztián Grecsó. The first person perspective of the narrator is used to relate a loving memory of his mother's very first, incommestible cake.

In the summer term of 2018/2019 the participants decided on the short story titled *Pogi néni* which was written by the female writer Krisztina Tóth. The story of an old, already retired lady who frequents cultural events in her city in order to consume all the snacks and drink all the wine prepared for the receptions.

Both stories use humor in a very relatable way. The main characters are normal, everyday people with which students may easily identify.

## 5.2 Analysis of student essays

The following points of interest were drawn after analyzing the essays:

- 1. Use of acquired vocabulary
- 2. Vocabulary personally judged as useful
- 3. Personal memories



4. Obtained cultural information and interest in further investigation; mention of author's data
5. Short story reflections
6. Comments on difficulty

In the presentation of the results each points of interest are commented and illustrated by citations taken from students' essays, written in *Italic* in this paper. These are translated into English by the author of the paper.

### 5.2.1 Use of aquired vocabulary

Results indicate that acquisition of vocabulary and linguistic use were successful. Students successfully recalled the plot using key words correctly, although some errors were detected in linguistic realization. This phenomenon appears to be normal. These errors do not prevent understanding since the terms are used correctly in a conceptual sense. (Kovács 2018). Thus figurative meaning of the words has been properly acquired. Despite the linguistic errors, the students are therefore closer to native use of language.

*„... one day the mother decided to overcome her feelings of inferiority<sup>1)</sup> and bake a cake.”*

*“Nowadays the mother prepares real divine cakes.”*

*„Greco's mother learnt from her mother-in-law how to cook, but baking has always remained a sensible field for her.”*

*„One day her mother tried to bake isler<sup>2)</sup>, as it was the star in the beginning of the 80's.”*

*„Everybody knows her by sight.”*

### 5.2.2 Vocabulary personally judged as useful

In most cases, the vocabulary students believed they acquired did not coincide with that used to sum up the plot. The author suggests that this is because the vocabulary used in the plot already formed some part of students' interlanguage, while the reminder was is in the process of being built in.

Reasons for learning certain expressions varied according to student. Some students said that they learnt an expression because they liked its meaning and that a similar one existed in their native language. Some examples are as follows:

*For example, ups and downs.<sup>3)</sup> I liked this expression. It means that something can be difficult, but in the next moment easy. In Japanese there is a similar expression, which means: 'there are mountains and valleys.' This difference of expressing the same thing is interesting."*

Other students found certain expressions interesting, because they could be used in different creative contexts, for example:

*"Somebody does not believe to his/her own mouth. This is an expression that can be useful. In reality it does not exist, the original expression is 'somebody does not believe to his/her own eyes.' But I think I can use it in other contexts as well. For example, after doing sports when I sniff my socks, I can say 'I cannot believe to my own nose.'"*

Other students pointed out that they learned a series of expressions because they were useful in everyday communication. For example:

*"... these expressions I use a lot of times even in Japanese, so I think it is good, that I learn them in Hungarian."*

Others focused on colloquial collocations from the dialogues. For example:

*"'Was it on purpose?' and 'Are you speaking seriously?' are useful utterances because Hungarians use them a lot."*

### **5.2.3 Personal memories**

One of the most important features of literature that it engages students and prompts them to reflect on their own experiences. Students therefore wish to communicate. Student answers to question C varied; the only common point was that students really felt engaged with the text. Nearly all of them recalled a memory. Memories were at times more concrete, but others involved thoughts on life. In other cases, recollecting personal experiences provided an opportunity for students to express their desires for the future.

Students described concrete personal memories as follows:

*"My mother sometimes bakes a cake. They are not so tasty that those from the shop, but I adore them. My mother begins to prepare the cake in the night, so in the morning when I wake up, I smell the nice,*

*sweet scent. In these moments I feel extremely happy.”*

*„When I was a child, I regularly went with my mother to do the shopping. I liked that supermarket because there the clients we could taste a lot of delicious food, among them cakes for example. Normally everybody tried one, but I queued several times to eat more pieces of cake. I did not take the cake home, like Pogi néni in the short story, but now I feel embarrassed when I remember what I did.”*

Other students felt very lonely after reading the story. For example:

*“I read this story at my place where I live alone and while reading I thought, I miss chatting with my family. I understood that chatting with my family is very important for me.”*

One student grasped an element which led her to a thought completely unrelated to the meaning of the short story, as follows:

*„In this short story there is a dog. I adore dogs and in our house there are two. One of them, still a puppy, was born by the end of March. It is so sweet! In the story a piece of chocolate cake is given to the dog. Sincerely, I do not think, it is a good idea to feed dogs with chocolate cake.”*

#### **5.2.4 Obtained cultural information and interest in further investigation; mention of author’s data**

Another positive implication of the short stories was that students learned elements of Hungarian culture. Moreover, they were motivated to experience these elements in context. Students used cultural data and vocabulary with perfection in their essays. For example:

*“I would like to taste isler and learn how to bake it.”*

Other students were interested in reading more short stories by the same autor. For example:

*“If I have the opportunity I really would like to read more Grecsó Krisztián short stories.”*

When learning about authors and even in the short stories themselves Hungarian magazines and newspapers are mentioned. Students became familiarized with some of these titles:

*“Grecsó Krisztián is a very versatile person: he is a writer, a poet, a musician and he works for Élet*

*és Irodalom<sup>4)</sup>.”*

Students acquired vocabulary related to artistic careers. This is important as they, as students of the Hungarian department, are expected to obtain wider vocabulary (in this case related to professions), than average learners of Hungarian. They also need this vocabulary to conduct further thesis researches.

Other students related previous cultural experiences to the text. For example:

*“For me, pogácsa<sup>5)</sup> means Budapest. I tried it there for the first time. I bought it in a supermarket. For my taste it was a little bit salty, but I liked it. I would like to eat it again.”*

Other student also recalled culinary-cultural memories after reading the short story. He described his experiences using an expression acquired during the term (underlined), as follows:

*“When I was in Hungary I happened to try a Hungarian disch called túrós csusza<sup>6)</sup>. When I got it in the restaurant, I saw it was a very strange looking dish, and when I tasted it, my eyes begun to turn and at the end I was not able to eat it. Despite it is a kind memory.”*

### **5.2.5 Short story reflections.**

The student comments analyzed in 5.2.3 and 5.2.4 revealed enjoyment in reading and working with the texts. Other, explicit remarks emphasize the level and reasons for such delight. For example:

*„I really liked this story, because it was funny and interesting and reading it I remembered my childhood. And I thought, I would like to read other short stories from the author.”*

Apart from describing the reasons why she liked the text, another student made the following observations:

*„I liked it, because in this short story everybody seems to be happy, so after reading I felt happy as well. But there is one thing that intrigues me: how come that the cake tasted so awful? This is a riddle...”*

Some students appreciated the texts because of the cultural contents. For example:

*„I especially liked the 7th fragment because, in my opinion, the writer helps Pogi néni just because of Advent time. In Japan, Advent is not celebrated, so I think it was interesting to read about it. I think it gave a very special touch to this short story.”*

### 5.2.6 Comments on difficulty

Although such information was not required from the orientating questions for the essay, some students commented on the challenges associated with using literature. Students generally found difficulty during the first reading, but had an easier time working with the text in fragments and while completing the comprehension tasks. For example:

*„For the first time, I thought the text was very difficult. But the one lesson-one scene rhythm and the vocabulary practices helped me a lot, and suddenly the text seemed to be easy.”*

Other student's comments reveal that a lack of comprehension influences how the text is evaluated. For example:

*„When I read the short story for the first time, I did not like it that much because I did not understand what the whole text meant.”*

Others said they could not imagine how to convert prose into dialogue as previously they had never dramatized texts. For example:

*„At the beginning I could not imagine how to make a script from the text.”*

## Conclusions

This paper highlighted the main benefits of using literature in second language education after a short historical review. Among the numerous positive aspect, the most important is that literature is authentic text. This helps students gain important linguistic, cultural and personal insight into the target country.

The second part of the paper focused on student feedback regarding the short novel dramatization class. Here, the material was not modified literary text. Student feedback indicated that they learned vocabulary and expressions that were useful in everyday communication. They also learned vocabulary that is likely useful in literary research. Students obtained information on Hungarian cultural items and were motivated to experience them in the future. All students indicated personal

engagement with the text because the short story format helped them recall childhood memories or simply prompted them to reflect on their present personal situations. Thus, students expanded their education outside the confines of typical coursebook content. This resulted in new topics of conversation. Students initially found it challenging to work with literary texts, but later used interpretation and reading comprehension tasks to facilitate understanding.

Working with literary texts thus appears to be a comforting process for both students and language teachers.

### Notes

- 1) Emphasis is mine. Underlined passages include terms acquired from the short novel.
- 2) This is a round biscuit covered by chocolate and filled with jam. It is popular in Hungary.
- 3) In Hungarian, this literally means “there were crests and troughs.”
- 4) Life and Literature is the title of a Hungarian magazin focused on public life and literature.
- 5) This is a small, round, bread-like snack in Hungary. It is featured in one of the short stories read in the classroom.
- 6) This is Hungarian noodle dish with cottage cheese, sour cream, and fried bacon.

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