

# Significance and Potential of Literature-Based EFL Education for Nursing Students

Emiko Ubukawa, Yoko Miyazaki Ishida  
Gunma Prefectural College of Health Sciences

**Objectives :** This paper aims to identify the significance and potential of using literature in nursing education in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom through a brief overview of literature-based education for medical and nursing students in the U.S. and the U.K.

**Methods :** First, the paper summarizes the history of literature-based education for medicine and nursing students in the U.S. and the U.K. Then, examples are presented of literary works that are expected to be effective teaching materials in future literature-based education for nursing students, and the main contents of these works are summarized.

**Conclusions :** An overview of the increasing number of papers on this topic reveals that it is essential for medical and nursing students not only to have a sufficient amount of basic knowledge in the medical field, but also to have ample opportunities to acquire awareness of the significance of understanding patients' feelings and dealing with ethical issues. We suggest that literature-based English classes are not only effective for improving the English skills of Japanese nursing students, but also for encouraging students to consider patients' feelings and to promote reflective thinking. Further studies on effective methods of literature-based English education for nursing students in the EFL classroom are necessary.

**Key words :** nursing, medicine, literature, education, EFL classroom

## 1. Introduction

For the last few decades, as the field of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) has been given attention to and has influenced English education, there have been an increasing number of English textbooks aimed at encouraging medical and nursing students to improve both English as a foreign language and medical English which may be used in clinical experiences in the future. Many sophisticated textbooks have been published and they are effective enough to help nursing students become more interested in learning

English and motivated to learn it than any other textbook does because they are closely related to their future professions. Most of these textbooks mainly focus on up-to-date medical news and issues, medical terminology and other articles concerning health and medicine in order for students to acquire a wider amount of medical knowledge. However, is that all teachers can offer nursing students to learn in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom?

It is true that nursing students need to learn the names of illnesses, symptoms of illnesses and medical treatments, but isn't it

living people who medical professionals should care for? In our view, medical and nursing students need not only spend much time acquiring basic knowledge of medicine such as anatomy, medication, clinical skills and so on, but also learn to see patients as persons not diseases and interpret them with respect. We believe that the EFL classroom can give them opportunities to understand other people, or their feelings through such activities as reading literary texts.

Why is literature suitable for medical and nursing students? Reading literary texts can be said to play a vital role in helping students obtain more opportunities to have better understanding of other people. One reason is that literary works depict the intricate relationship among people, thereby making it possible for students to simulate what they might not experience in the real world. Moreover, their narrative power induces readers into the depths of people's feelings. That is the big difference between literary works and textbooks based on medical sciences.

In this paper, the most important thing we would like to suggest is the significance of using literature in the EFL classroom for nursing students. First, we would like to provide a bird's eye view of medical and nursing education in the U.S. and U.K. which utilizes literature as an effective teaching material. Second, we would like to offer some examples which can be exploited in the EFL classroom for Japanese nursing students in order for them to enhance their insight into their patients' mental sufferings caused by

their illnesses. Finally, we would like to discuss the benefits of using literature in EFL classrooms for nursing students.

## 2. A Historical Overview of Literature-Based Education in Medicine and Nursing

Generally speaking, many people may think that literature bears no relation to medicine. M.F. McLellan and A.H. Jones state that "bringing literature into medical education was not as odd as it might appear: the affinity between literature and medicine has long been recognized and stretched back to antiquity,"<sup>1)</sup> referring to Apollo, the Greek god of medicine and poetry.

It is not our purpose to explain in detail about the history of science, but it will be useful for us to make a few remarks on it. Yoichiro Murakami (1936-), a professor of the history of science, explains that, in the western world, scholastic philosophy was a mainstream and the discrimination between science and non-science did not exist before the term, 'scientist' was coined by W. Whewell (1794-1866) in around 1840 in the Victorian age<sup>2)</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727), who have been influential in modern science, were not actually called scientists at that time. Due to the emergence of multiculturalism, 'science' was regarded as one of cultures<sup>3)</sup>.

C.P. Snow (1905-1980) referred to a culture of literary intellectuals and that of scientists as 'two cultures'<sup>4)</sup> in 1959 in his revolutionary books. His concern was that non-scientists despised the scientists for being

“shallowly optimistic, unaware of man’s condition,”<sup>5)</sup> while the scientists scorned the non-scientists for being “totally lacking in foresight”<sup>6)</sup>. Furthermore, he stressed that “this polarization is sheer loss to all”<sup>7)</sup>. However, it can be said that his concern on “the intellectual loss”<sup>8)</sup> would imply that an epoch would come when the two cultures began to accept each other. The fact that the wall between literary intellectuals (non-scientists) and scientists was disappearing is demonstrated by the following remarks by Snow: “the separation between the scientists and non-scientists is much less bridgeable among the young than it was even thirty years”<sup>9)</sup>.

This assimilation of ‘two cultures’<sup>10)</sup> brought about by the reflection of specialization have greatly influenced medicine. In medical education, interest in the humanities has been revived slowly but steadily. McLellan and Jones also state that the relationship between literature and medicine has been explored in myriad ways as a result of changes in U.S. medical education<sup>11)</sup>.

## 2-1 Literature in Medicine

According to Rita Charon and her colleagues, “students were supposed to absorb the human competencies of doctoring called “the art of medicine” during training”<sup>12)</sup> without learning the human bases of practice until the initiation of progressive educational reform in the 1960s. In addition, they point out that the one goal ‘human recognition of their suffering’<sup>13)</sup> has disappeared although the remaining two goals, ‘skilled diagnosis’<sup>14)</sup> and ‘effective therapy,’<sup>15)</sup> are fully achieved. That clearly indicates that before the 1960s medical

professions undervalued the importance of interaction with patients to understand their sufferings.

As Charon and her colleagues point out, literature has been introduced to medical schools in the U.S. since 1972<sup>16)</sup>. As a matter of fact, academic papers on literature, or narratives in medical education have been published since the 1970s. Additionally, the first issue of *Literature and Medicine* was published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1982<sup>17)</sup>.

F. Hamilton emphasizes that the psychiatrist, Robert Coles, regarded literature merely as “a tool for teaching medical ethics”<sup>18)</sup>. His suggestion is that the only aim of using literature in medical school should be to teach ethical reflection.

In this regard, D.S. Sheriff at Al Arab Medical University, McLellan and Jones have similar views on using literature in medical education. Adding to this view, Sheriff states that “literature prepares us as well as teaches us the basic value of life... compassion, love, truth, righteousness are nurtured in us through such literary classics”<sup>19)</sup>.

According to Hamilton and Moore, in the U.S., over the last 30 years, it has been desirable for medical students to turn to the humanities to broaden their studies. They underline “the need for an approach encompassing not just the patients’ symptoms and signs but their interaction with patients’ lives and environment”<sup>20)</sup>. In 1994, some one-third of the medical schools in the U.S. used literary texts as teaching materials<sup>21)</sup>. They point out that “similarly, in the U.K., an

increasing number of literary options have evolved after publication of *Tomorrow's Doctors\** in 1993<sup>22)</sup>.

In 1995, Charon and her colleagues indicated five broad goals that have been targeted in literature-based medical education. They are 1) literary accounts of illness can teach physicians concrete and powerful lessons about the lives of sick people, 2) great works of fiction about medicine enable physicians to recognize the power and implications of what they do, 3) through the study of narrative, physician can better understand the patients' stories of sickness and his or her own personal stake in medical practice, 4) literary study contributes to physicians' expertise in narrative ethics, and 5) literary theory offers new perspectives on the work and the genres of medicine<sup>23)</sup>. To fulfill these five goals, traditional literary works, the works of contemporary and culturally diverse writers are chosen as appropriate teaching materials.

In *The Lancet*, McLellan and Jones suggest that using literature in medical education will offer the students "increased empathic understanding, development of complex interpersonal skills and a greater appreciation for the art of medicine"<sup>24)</sup>.

According to the research led by Hamilton and Moore, reports from some courses such as the ones at Oslo and Chicago Universities in the U.S. and Birmingham and Nottingham Medical Schools in the U.K. show generally favorable outcomes, concluding that "the students had a better understanding of the psychological impacts of illness and that their attitudes had changed towards patients after

participation"<sup>25)</sup>. Yet, they also state that there was little clear evidence of a positive effect of literature used in medical education because of a lack of definition.

F.D. Fraser has a similar view to McLellan and Jones in regards to using literature as "a means of enhancing physicians' and medical students' empathetic skills"<sup>26)</sup>.

He also suggests that patients' narratives<sup>\*\*</sup> told to their physicians are analogous to literary narratives, and it is a challenge for physicians to try to understand the hidden meanings of patients' narratives. He claims that "literature, then, can be a source of experience and a means of testing one's skills in understanding human motivation"<sup>27)</sup>.

## 2-2 Literature in Nursing

The last but the most important thing we must discuss is the effectiveness of using literature for nursing students. According to P. Derbyshire, there has been no comparable movement within the nursing field while the discipline of medical humanities has been developing for some two decades<sup>28)</sup>. We believe that it is natural that the discipline of humanities in nursing field should be further developed and taught as a part of nursing education.

J. Smoller states that nursing is a profession which combines the use of scientific principles and methodology with the art of caring for human beings and that "it is literature that readily provides the foundation for man's understanding and exploration of the human spirit... nurses may utilize literature in understanding and reinforcing the importance of disease in the patient's total life story"<sup>29)</sup>.

Moreover, P. Newcomb and her colleagues conducted a pilot project to identify potentially effective strategies for increasing students' cultural sensitivity and reflective thinking skills and reported on an analysis of clinical journals written by students as they interpreted readings from two fictional texts. After their project, they concluded that "stimulating reflection may be one of the most important contributions of imaginative literature to nursing education because the practice of reflection is essential to critical thinking, a highly prized attribute of professional nursing"<sup>30</sup>.

As the above-mentioned papers suggest, using literature in nursing education is significant to fostering empathetic skills and raising awareness of the importance of good communication with patients.

### 3. Tips for Using Literary Works for Nursing Students

A great majority of literary texts such as novels, narratives and poems depict ill patients and their ailments in other foreign countries not to mention in the U.K. and U.S. As J.R. Skelton and his colleagues concluded "we can hope only to enlighten medical students rather than train literary critics,"<sup>31</sup> the aim of using literature in medical education is not quite similar to the proper purpose of literary reading. Nevertheless, it must help students at least to be trained to see a patient as a whole person, not just as a patient with an illness. Therefore, as they put it, virtually all their students can read personal accounts of illness in the same way as they read literary works

though they are not really literary.

It goes without saying that it is of great importance for teachers to choose texts suitable for Japanese nursing students in the EFL classroom. Here we would like to categorize literary works appropriate for Japanese nursing students into three groups to show the possibility of using some literary works written in English for them. The first group is a kind of metaphorical stories which describe how human minds and their bodies are interconnected and how circumstances under which characters live their own lives affect them. The second group is literary texts which depict someone's death and how the surrounding people are affected by his or her death. The third group is literary texts which deal with real illnesses leading to ethical issues and the complex human relations caused by them.

#### 3-1 Illness as a Metaphor

In literature, illnesses are depicted not only as signs or symptoms of a bad physical condition but also as metaphors, as Susan Sontag (1933-2004) shows in her classical studies of metaphors of illness<sup>32</sup>. This means that illnesses have a great impact on the human spirit and behavior and social activities. Skelton and his colleagues' following remarks are suggestive and meaningful.

Illness in literature is typically metaphorical. There is usually little point in discussing the way that clinical signs and symptoms are portrayed, nor is there always much to be gained by treating portrayals of illness in fictional characters as representations of how

illness truly affects people. When literature refers to health, it is to serve some literary aim—perhaps to provide a metaphor for social malaise<sup>33)</sup>.

Here we would like to take two stories *The Secret Garden* (1911) and *Pobby and Dingan* (2000) as examples.

*The Secret Garden* written by Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849-1924) is one of the classical stories about children's mental and physical improvement through the healing power of nature. Written in the Victorian age, when Florence Nightingale, the pioneer of modern nursing and the founder of the first nurse training school, was active, the story seems to have been heavily influenced by her ideas on health. Therefore, it can be studied from a health point of view although it has been interpreted in myriad ways.

In the early chapters, Mary is described as sickly, jaundiced and contrary as she was taunted a 'Mistress Mary Quite Contrary,'\*\*\* which can be metaphorically compared to the abandoned garden she found and she wanted to care for. As Griswold states "Mary's life has been the exact parallel of the Secret Garden's concealment,"<sup>34)</sup> Mary regards herself as the long closed and abandoned garden. Her frequent visits and care for the garden convert the garden into a beautiful one and, at the same time, she changed into a lively and cheerful girl. Cultivating the garden is linked with cultivating Mary herself. This story will be a good indicator of the necessity of good balance between mind and body.

Another possible story we can introduce to students in this category is *Pobby and Dingan*

written by the British writer, Ben Rice (1972-). It deals with a psychological problem of a father who keeps seeking for an unattainable opal and a daughter who keeps seeing unreal, imaginary friends.

### 3-2 What One's Death Is and Does to Other People's Deaths

This type of story can often be seen in children's books, because most of them aim at describing children's spiritual growth, where someone's death could often become its trigger. Without doubt, someone's death, whether he or she is familiar or not, gives children a clue as to what death is. Deeply thinking and imagining other people's feelings allows children to grow mentally.

Let us give examples. *Charlotte's Web* (1952) by E.B. White (1899-1995) reveals to us the mysterious and marvelous unbroken chain of life of all living things. The main character, a girl named Fern is able to prevent her father from killing a little pig called Wilbur, with the help of the spider named Charlotte, who can weave words expressing her thoughts and feelings. The pig, in turn, helps Charlotte's hundreds of babies travel through the sky after her death. This kind of story tells us that we human beings are also a part of the chain of life.

*Bridge to Terabithia* (1977) written by Katherine Paterson (1932-) who was a Newberry Medal Winner, is a story where two main characters help each other and make their own secret place called Terabithia. One of them suddenly died before the completion of Terabithia, but other main character strives to complete the bridge to their kingdom

overcoming the sadness of his friend's death.

*The Body in Four Seasons* (1982) by Stephen King (1947-), made into a famed film, *Stand By Me* (1986) is a story where four boys travel to look for a body which one of the four boys knows lays somewhere. It can be stated that the boys' trip in pursuit of the body means a rite of passage for them, which they must pass through. Their mere curiosity about the death leads them to the dead body, but the actual body strikes them with a sense of awe.

### 3-3 Illness and Ethical Issues

*Flowers for Algernon* (1959) is originally a science fiction short story written by Daniel Keyes (1927-). The novel version published in 1966 is written as a series of progress reports by Charlie, the first human test subject for the surgery. The main character, Charlie, who has a mental disability, leads to a dramatic improvement in his mental performance after undergoing the surgery by two professors, who already succeeded in the surgery on a mouse called Algernon. The story touches upon many different ethical and moral themes; for instance, is it right to see the mentally disabled somewhat inferior to so called normal people, is it really necessary to perform treatment of the mentally challenged, and so on?

*Awakenings* (1973) written by the American writer and a physician, Oliver Sacks (1933-) is a story based on fiction in which a miraculous medicine brings about many awakenings. The book is a collection of the patients' stories in which many patients with encephalitis lethargica awake thanks to a miraculous medicine although it turns out that the effects of the treatment is only temporary.

Not just the patients but their families and all the people involved are forced to experience various complex feelings. By reading such stories, students can gain opportunities to think about the ethical problems that could come up in the medical field.

*The Notebook* (1996) written by Nicholas Sparks (1965-) tells us about an elderly woman with dementia and her husband, who keeps reading his wife his memories of times with his wife he noted down in his notebook. The book will give students opportunities to deeply consider the importance of affectionate attitudes towards patients as well as the sufferings of the patients' family.

*My Sister's Keeper* (2004) was written by the American female writer, Jodi Picoult (1966-), who was inspired by cutting edge science while researching eugenics and the American Eugenics Society founded in the 1930s when the Nazis began to explore racial hygiene<sup>35</sup>). The story is about two siblings; one of them named Kate who has suffered from leukemia since the age of two and the other named Anna who was given a life with an expectation as bone marrow donor to save her older sister. The story will help students to expand the scope of thinking about the morality of intentional birth-giving and organ transplants, which Kate is forced to take to recover from her illness.

## 4. Discussion

In the U.S. and the U.K., literature is used in courses which are part of the medical and nursing education curriculum not particularly in the language courses. There literature is

taught in the students' mother tongues. However, it does not seem to be problematic to use literature as a part of a language course. In fact, in Japan, we believe that there are benefits of using literature in EFL classrooms for nursing students because human relations, attitudes towards death, and medical morality are universal topics although there might be some cultural differences in their interpretation. Literature can be a useful material because it gives students opportunities both to learn language skills and to be sensitive to different cultures and to their own internal growth. Ability to be sensitive to different cultures, or something different from oneself, is an important skill that nurses should have.

Why not, then, use literature in EFL classrooms for nursing students? L. Clandfield lists many good reasons for using literature in the EFL classroom<sup>36</sup>). One reason is that literature is for students, whether they are EFL learners or not, beneficial in sharing others' feelings and opinions. Literature encourages readers to share emotions with the characters in literary works. Sharing feelings with other people makes students more aware of themselves and grows mentally and moreover develops attitudes towards others.

As EFL teachers, we must choose materials that are appealing to students in order to motivate them to learn the language. As B. Moss & T.A. Young state, "the enjoyment provided by engaging with topics of interest can open students to the pleasure of reading,"<sup>37</sup>) we need to choose appropriate texts for nursing students. We believe that

literature can be an appropriate material for nursing students whose interests should be taking care of patients both physically and mentally. Literature allows them to have a better understanding of patients' lives and their concerns about illnesses as well as the symptoms of their disease in order to assist their parents in recovering their afflictions. Using such materials in the EFL classroom that raise nursing students' interests will motivate them to learn the target language.

## 5. Conclusion

The overview of medical and nursing education based on literature will make it possible for teachers to become confident when instructing students to learn English by using literature. However, in the EFL classroom, students cannot always understand literary works in English completely in the limited time given to them as coursework. So it is indispensable for teachers to choose appropriate literary works and encourage them to learn English without getting bored and disappointed. Furthermore, it is important for teachers to induce students to have opportunities to think about the cultural background of the story which students will read and the topic on our lives and health, ethical problems related to organ transplants, euthanasia and so on, without mentioning the understanding of the story.

To help students read the original without reluctance and understand it better, we, teachers need to consider effective ways to use literary works. Utilizing Japanese translation of literary works may be one way. Using



movies based on the stories could be another effective way to learn language as well as to be aware of issues in the medical field by giving a clue to the flow of the story. A wide variety of activities should be prepared in order for teachers to make the most use of the literary works appropriate for students. The future direction of this study will be how literary works should be used and what activities should be done in EFL classrooms for nursing students.

### Notes

\* *Tomorrow's Doctors* is a handbook in which the GMC (General Medical Council) sets the knowledge, skills and behaviors that medical students should learn at UK medical schools.

\*\* Patients' narratives are not quite the same as literary narratives. They are patients' stories told to their physicians and nurses. Greenhalgh and Hurwitz point out that "the narrative provides meaning, context and perspective for the patient's predicament" and that "the study of narrative offers a possibility of developing an understanding that cannot be arrived at by any other means"<sup>38)</sup>.

\*\*\* '*Mistress Mary Quite Contrary*' is one of the popular English nursery rhymes. Burnett's first title for *The Secret Garden was Mistress Mary Quite Contrary*. According to Phillis Bixler, Burnett emphasizes how Mary is isolated, physically and geographically, psychologically and socially by using the term 'contrary'<sup>39)</sup>.

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## 看護学生対象の英語教育における文学活用の意義と可能性

鶴生川恵美子, 石田 洋子  
群馬県立県民健康科学大学

**目的：**看護学生対象の EFL のクラスにおいて文学を使用して英語の授業を行うことの意義や可能性について検証する。

**方法：**初めに、英米の医療系学生に対して文学を使用した教育について歴史的に俯瞰する。次に、日本の看護学生の英語の授業において教材として考える文学作品の例とそれぞれのテーマの概略を述べる。

**結論：**英米における医療系学生を対象とした文学基盤の授業に関しての多くの論文は、患者への理解や倫理的問題を取り扱うために、文学を教材とした授業の必要性を訴えている。同様に、日本の看護学生にとっても英語の授業の中で医療系学生の関心のある文学作品を題材とした授業を行うことが、外国語としての英語習得とともに、患者への共感の気持ちを引き出す契機を与えると結論付けた。学生に適切と考えられる文学作品を分類し、それぞれのテーマを設定した。今後、これらの作品を授業で生かすための授業研究の必要性を述べ結びとした。

**キーワード：**看護, 医学, 文学, 教育, EFL クラス