# TEACHING POETRY THROUGH VIDEO: A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH TO TEACHING LITERATURE

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## Introduction

A considerable body of literature exists on the value of teaching or using literary texts in the foreign language classroom. Many benefits of studying literature have been identified, for example, it is authentic, motivating, develops linguistic awareness, and lends itself to interaction in the classroom (Clandfield, par 4). Poetry, specifically, has been described as universal and non-trivial, and "the fact that students can make a personal response is in itself a motivating factor" (Maley and Duff 8–9). Concerns focus on the complexity of language but also on the traditional lecture-based, teacher–centered style of teaching literature which is out of place in the communicative, learner-centered methodology currently adopted in foreign language teaching. Wei explains the traditional teaching approach as mainly lecture-based with students being assigned texts to read in advance then attending lectures about the history and background, themes and stylistic features but with little opportunity to respond directly to the literature (par 4–6). Although "literature can always provoke thought, reflection, associations and various responses by students" (Wei, par 2), in the teacher-centered class, "all the information about the literary work, the author, the history, the society, and the style or theme of the work are taught before learners have the chance to explore and to experience the text" (Wei, par 6).

Recent studies in this area have focused on more learner-centered approaches to the use of literature in the language classroom. The concept of "learner-centeredness" is difficult to define precisely. Lin

places its origins in 1960s liberalism with its emphasis on teachers becoming more responsive to the needs of learners and learners becoming more active in the classroom (15). One of the leading exponents of learner-centered methodology, David Nunan, has expanded this definition to include the concept of learner involvement in selecting content, in the process of learning and in making decisions about "what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught and how it will be assessed" (Nunan 134). In the studies on literature in foreign language teaching, the former definition seems to be prevalent and in this paper, the terms "learner-centered" or "student-centered" are used to refer to a more interactive, participatory style of learning, emphasizing "learner activity rather than passivity" (Gibbs qtd in O'Neill and McMahon, par 8) and "an increased sense of autonomy in the learner" (Lea et al qtd in O'Neill and McMahon, par 7). The role of the teacher, in the context of teaching literature, is seen as developing students' ability to interact with the text as an "intermediary between author, literary work and receiver" (McRae qtd in Wei, par 10).

Recently, an increasing amount of research is also being done into the question of using video—specifically on the use of English language movies or feature films. At this stage, no agreement has been reached as to the value of using movies with language learners. Although research into students' attitudes repeatedly shows that students like learning language through movies (Canning-Wilson 5; Iwasaki 16), which suggests they have a high motivational value, there is still a debate as to whether there are any educational benefits. Use of video in the classroom is often criticized for the so-called "Friday afternoon approach" of showing an entire movie non-stop for 90 minutes with no pre-viewing or follow-up activities and therefore, no learning on the part of the students (Sherman 70). However, Iwasaki argues that "entertaining students through audiovisual materials does not mean that academic study has to suffer in the process" (2). Used correctly, the use of movies or TV programmes made for a native-speaker audience, as opposed to textbook audiovisual materials, are motivating for students not only because of their perceived "authenticity" but also

because a film represents "a story that wants to be told rather than a lesson that needs to be taught" (Ward and Lepeintre, par 4). As further justification for the use of the use of movies, Sherman cites the widespread availability of English language television and movies in almost all countries via DVD, Satellite TV or, increasingly, through the Internet free of charge, and argues that these represent an important resource for English language teachers (1). She argues that "video is today's medium" with young people increasingly media-literate, relying more on audiovisual media than the printed word for their information and entertainment (2).

As part of this ongoing debate, this paper describes an attempt to adopt a learner-centered approach to teaching literature by using a movie. The movie, *Dead Poets Society* (1989), is the story of an inspirational English Literature teacher with unorthodox methods and the effect he has on students at a traditional, ultra-conservative boys' preparatory school in America in the late 1950s. The movie is popular with English language teachers, especially at university level because "students can easily relate to its main themes: education; teaching and learning; child/parent conflict; the importance of individuality and making one's own choices in life; dreams and ambitions for the future" (Ford 37). In this study, the aim was to use the movie to introduce students to the study of poetry in English. It was assumed that if students could understand the themes and the basic message of the movie—"Carpe Diem" or "Seize the Day"—then they might be better able to reach an understanding of the meaning of the poems cited in the movie by the teacher character, Mr. Keating, in his attempts to convey this central message to his students. In other words, placing the poems in the context of the movie might enhance the students' understanding of the poems. The setting of the movie in a high school literature classroom had the added advantage that the students *watching* the movie would learn about poetry alongside the student characters *in* the movie.

This paper will begin by explaining the background and context of the project then review current ideas about teaching literature and

using movies in the foreign language classroom. Section two will describe the classroom practice and explain how the methodology adopted reflects the theories discussed in Section one. Finally, the paper will reflect on the successes and limitations of the methodology used.

## Section One

### 1.  Background and Teaching Context

The context was a Sophomore reading and writing class in a Literature Department at a Japanese University. One aim of this class was to introduce students to literary analysis of English literature through the medium of English. Originally, in the first semester, students studied short stories and were introduced to literary terminology such as plot, theme, characterization, setting, point of view, while in the second semester, students studied poetry and learned to analyze and write about poems. The initial response of students to studying poetry was always a sense of dread based on their belief that poetry was difficult and they would not be able to understand it. At the end of the semester, student feedback indicated that students enjoyed studying poetry but still found it difficult to understand and write about. At this stage, written assignments usually took the form of personal response papers, rather than formal essays.

Following the introduction of Cultural Studies to the range of subjects offered in the department, cultural as well as literary topics were added to the syllabus, and the amount of time available to focus on literary analysis and writing about literature was reduced to one semester. In addition, more emphasis was to be placed on developing students' academic writing skills. Although there was no requirement to teach poetry at all, teachers could choose short stories or excerpts from novels as examples of literary texts, this author was convinced of the value of studying poetry and, therefore, wanted to find a way to present it over a shorter time frame and in a way that the students could understand and be able to write about in the form of a five paragraph essay—something that had not been achieved so far in

teaching this class.

The movie *Dead Poets Society* had previously been shown at the end of the poetry semester as a way of wrapping up the course. The movie was shown over two weeks followed by a discussion about some of the themes of the movie but no attempt was made to examine the ideas expressed in the movie about the importance of poetry and the teaching of poetry, or to study some of the poems that are referred to during the movie. The movie always proved popular with the students who seemed engaged and interested in the issues it raises. This study attempted to capitalize on the genuine enthusiasm students have for watching English language movies in class, and their interest in this movie in particular, to help them reach an understanding of meaning in poetry and to develop confidence in their ability to express their opinions about poems both in discussion and through essay writing. In addition, given the passion and enthusiasm for poetry portrayed in the movie, a secondary aim was to develop if not a love for poetry then at least to demystify it a little and reduce the sense of fear and loathing that students usually express at the very mention of poetry. As Hall puts it, the task of the teacher is:

> To motivate, to contextualize and to individualize often anxious and insecure readers' experiences of the text to promote pleasure *and* understanding and so to promote meaning and memorability. (398)

Using the movie *Dead Poets Society* to teach poetry was an attempt to achieve this.

## 2.  Literature in the Language Classroom

As Schultz points out, "for literally generations of students, the study of literature constituted the cornerstone of language learning" (3) while Howatt reminds us that an interest in studying the literature and philosophy of a foreign country was one of the main reasons for studying a foreign language (61). The arrival of the communicative

approach to language teaching, with its emphasis on speaking skills for everyday life, "deflected attention away from anything which did not seem to have a practical purpose" (Maley and Duff 6). Consequently, literature was seen as irrelevant because it "did not respond to the need for authentic, contemporary, primarily oral linguistic input" (Schultz 3). Schultz adds that the "highly stylized and sophisticated language" of literature was thought to be too difficult for learners to tackle (3). Savvidou describes the reluctance of language teachers to use literary texts due to "a general perception that literature is particularly complex and inaccessible to the foreign language learner" and may even have a negative effect on language acquisition because "the creative use often deviates from the conventions and rules which govern standard, non-literary discourse" (par 3). Against this background, poetry in particular, was seen as an anachronism in the foreign language classroom (Maley and Duff 6). Furthermore, Maley and Duff suggest that "possibly because of the way poetry has been taught in the mother tongue, both teachers and students view poetry with feelings ranging from slight misgivings to downright dislike" (6–7). Paran, meanwhile, argues that the role of literature in EFL is "still not firmly established" (75) referring to Mao Sihui's claim that literature classes are being cut for English majors (85) as well as citing the constant need to justify the teaching of literature (75), something which would not be necessary if its value was broadly accepted.

Recently, the tide appears to be turning. Carter and Long cite renewed interest in the study of literature in language learning since the 1980s (1). This does not represent a return to the traditional grammar-translation approach to language learning but rather reflects:

The shifting view of literature from historical and cultural artifact to dynamic, plural text that comes into being via interactions with individual readers and in outlining the potential effect literature can have on cognitive processing skills and on personal and cultural understanding. (Schultz 27)

In other words, recent studies have focused on how to use literature in the language classroom in the context of a more learner-centered methodology. Carter and Long describe three main approaches to teaching literature, each approach based on a different pedagogical goal:

(i) The cultural model

This is the traditional approach to literature where the text is set in its social, political and historical context and, as such, is a vehicle for students "to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own" and to convey the concept of universal values transcending cultures and historical periods (Carter and Long 2). This model is associated with a teacher-centered, transmissive style of teaching and is often heavily criticized for this reason. However, with its focus on the universality of ideas and experiences, encouraging students to understand different cultures within the framework of their own experience, this model has potential for use in a learner-centered classroom.

(ii) The language model

This is the most common approach to teaching literature (Carter and Long 9). It highlights linguistic features such as figurative language, and encourages focus on the relationship between language and meaning, how literary language is used to convey meaning and is seen as a "way in" to the text through language (Carter and Long 9). However, it has been criticized as 'reductive' if the language activities are unconnected to the specific meaning of the text (Carter and McRae qtd in Savvidou, par 8). Language based approaches are seen as "only of real value if they embrace the personal growth approach" (Carter and Long 10) but if used in this way, the language model lends itself to activity-based, learner-centered teaching.

(iii) The personal growth model

This model has been seen as an attempt to bridge the divide between the cultural and language model by placing the text in the cultural context of the learner (Savvidou, par 9) with the aim of developing an appreciation of literature that will continue after the course has finished (Carter and Long 3). Students connect the text to their own experiences and express their own feelings and opinions about it. This model emphasizes the interaction that takes place between the reader and the text rather than the meaning inherent in the text itself. As Savvidou puts it, "learning is said to take place when the readers are able to interpret text and construct meaning on the basis of their own experience" (par 9).

Harlan Kellem also cites two pedagogical approaches to the study of literature based on literary criticism:

(i) Stylistics, the analysis of language forms in text, broadly corresponds to Carter and Long's language model.
(ii) Reader-Response emphasizes the reader's interaction with the text and matches the aims of the personal growth model described earlier. (Kellem 12)

While the merits of the stylistics/language based approach are widely understood, there may be a tendency to see the Reader-Response / Personal Growth model as a less 'academic' and therefore, less valuable approach to the teaching of literature, especially at university level. Supporters of the stylistics model such as Hanauer, argue that students derive meaning "95.94% of the time" from focusing on the language (qtd in Kellem 14). In support of the Reader-Response model, Kellem cites two studies: Akyel and Yalcin, in 1990, found that not allowing students to respond personally had a negative effect on their learning while Liaw's 2001 study suggested that students are more interested in stories when they could relate the themes or characters to their own life experience (13).

Both Kellem and Savvidou propose an integrated approach to teaching literature combining cultural, linguistic and personal growth models. Although the author of this paper is persuaded of the merits of such an approach, due to constraints of time, only the Personal Growth / Reader-Response model was adopted. The concept of universality in literature, an aspect of the cultural model, was also developed within the context of a learner-centered interaction with the poems.

## 3. Video in the classroom

This section will present current literature on the use of video in the classroom, concentrating specifically on full-length feature films rather than TV dramas, news clips, music videos or other examples of authentic video material. I will begin by summarizing the debate about the value of using video, and then discuss the various ways video can be used in the language learning process. Finally, methodological considerations will be described and the methodology adopted in this study will be explained in terms of current theory.

Although there is much anecdotal evidence and some research findings that suggest watching videos is motivating for students, as mentioned earlier, Katchen claims there have been few serious studies on how video has been used in the classroom and with what effect (par 1) while Lin describes a "shocking scarcity of serious research into what has been simply the assumed positive influence of authentic video resources; nor has any serious research been undertaken regarding the potential for learning inherent in the use of video materials in conjunction with student-centered approaches to classroom management and learning" (7). Canning-Wilson refers the limitations of the research that has been done and points to considerable skepticism amongst some writers regarding the usefulness of showing a feature film to English language learners in terms of improving listening comprehension (par 1–7). Such skepticism is often based on the idea that the "dense and idiomatic language" used in feature films is not only difficult for learners to grasp but also fails to provide students with language they

can use outside the classroom (Seferoglu 2). However, more recent research cited in Canning-Wilson suggests that "images contextualized in video or on its [sic] own can help reinforce the language" (par 7). The idea of poetry being contextualized in a movie to facilitate understanding of the poems was the motivation behind the study described in this paper.

It should be noted that studies disputing the validity of using video are often pre-1990s and more recent research has produced more positive findings. One explanation for this could be that initial use of video in the classroom focused on its use as a listening comprehension activity only, whereas more recent practice has identified many ways that feature films can be exploited as a "contextually rich source of authentic material" (Seferoglu 1). As well as listening comprehension, Arthur suggests that "video can give students realistic models to imitate for role play; can increase awareness of other cultures by teaching appropriateness . . . and can widen the classroom repertoire of activities" (qtd in Canning-Wilson, par 9). Movies can be used for teaching vocabulary, especially colloquial expressions and slang, as well as providing a valuable insight into culture and cultural practices (Brown 45). King suggests movies have the advantage of exposing students to native pronunciation, stress and accent (2) as well as developing critical thinking skills through discussion of themes (3), while Sherman identifies several ways that video enhances language learning:

- As a way of accessing the world of English language media— often one of the stated goals of English learners.
- Listening comprehension particularly pragmatic understanding of language in context.
- Providing a model of authentic language including a variety of accents, vocabulary and grammar structures.
- As a "window on English language culture."
- As a stimulus for discussion or writing tasks citing the 'film of the book' as a useful addition when studying literature.

○ As "a moving picture book" showing people, places, events and behaviors outside the experience of the language learners. (Sherman 2–3)

Finally, Canning-Wilson adds the opportunity for students to "predict information, infer ideas and analyse the world that is brought into the classroom" (par 8). It seems that in the "video age," English teachers are developing more and more creative ways to take advantage of this valuable resource.

In terms of the study described in this paper, the movie was used mainly as an insight into culture, specifically the American education system, and as a stimulus for discussion and writing both about the movie itself and about poetry. Key vocabulary was identified for the students including expressions connected to the themes as well as some colloquial expressions. However, as the movie was set in the 1950s, many of these expressions have now fallen out of use so were not deemed valuable. As the context for using the movie was a reading and writing class, the movie was not used as a listening comprehension exercise. It was also hoped that the motivational aspect of watching a movie, as cited earlier, would be an advantage in developing students' interest in studying poetry. The idea of using a movie to teach poetry, or literature in general, was not specifically mentioned in any of the research discussed here.

More positive recent findings on using movies in the classroom could also be a result of changes in methodology. Just as the teaching of literature seems to be moving towards a more active, learner-centered approach, with regard to using movies in the classroom, the consensus seems to suggest that students need to be provided with tasks to enable then to engage actively with the movie rather than just passively watching it (Qiang, Hai and Wolff 7) and studies such as the one by Qiang, Hai and Wolff suggest that using a movie is more successful when students are engaged in targeted, relevant tasks. These should include preparatory tasks to complete before viewing the movie, tasks to complete while viewing and opportunities to respond to

the movie after viewing through discussion and writing activities. As Seferolgu says "it is essential to set clear tasks so that students watch with a purpose" (8) while Brown maintains that "without a defined goal or guided activity only short-term learning benefits" will result (46) On the other hand, Sherman offers a word of caution, suggesting that "too many worksheets and activities can detract from the experience of watching the movie" (7) and advocating that writing and reading tasks should be kept to a minimum during the viewing (9).

Other decisions to be made regarding methodology are described by King:

(i) pedagogical reasons
(ii) approach to viewing i.e. all or selected scenes
(iii) with or without subtitles
(iv) what kinds of activities will maximize student involvement

The decisions taken on these questions in this study will be explained in order.

Firstly, as stated in the introduction, the pedagogical reason for using a movie was to enhance the students' enjoyment and understanding of poetry. The aim for the Sophomore reading and writing class was to improve students' academic essay writing skills in preparation for writing a Graduation Essay in English and also to teach students how to write about literary themes. From previous experience, I found that students could not write well about poetry because they did not understand it well enough to have an idea or to form an opinion about it and struggled to come up with a thesis statement on which to base an essay. It was hoped that setting the poems in the context of the movie would give them enough understanding of the themes of the poems to write about them.

Secondly, Canning-Wilson suggest that feature length movies should be shown in segments as there is little evidence of any advantages to showing the whole movie at once. She cites Balatova's findings that student attention span is lowered when watching videos in a

foreign language to the extent that around two-thirds of students lose concentration after 10 minutes (par 11). This would suggest that breaking the movie into short segments would be the best way to show it. On the other hand, Sherman argues that viewing should not be interrupted too often for explanation or comprehension checks (9). When showing the movie *Dead Poets Society* to the class, I showed about 30 minutes per week, divided into two or three segments, the shortest being about 7 minutes, the longest 17 minutes. The only exception to this was the final section of the movie. To avoid spoiling the climax and resolution which are particularly dramatic, and, I knew from previous experience, particularly emotional for the students, the last 30 minutes were shown without interruption and the students were not assigned any tasks to do during viewing. Students have no problem concentrating on this last section of the movie as, by this point, they are emotionally invested in the film and its characters and are keen to find how it ends.

The question of subtitles was a difficult one. The advantage of DVD over video is that movies can be shown dubbed into the local language, in this case Japanese, or with subtitles either in English or Japanese. In an English class with English majors taught by a native speaker, it was not appropriate to show the film dubbed into Japanese, so it was shown with the original English soundtrack. Moreover, from a pedagogical point of view, if a movie is seen as an opportunity for students to gain an insight into another culture, then it was important that the characters in the film should seen speaking English rather than dubbed into Japanese. Using English subtitles was considered but, based on past experience, students often do not have the reading speed necessary to read the English subtitles and scenes have to be shown several times for students to reach a sufficient level of understanding. In addition, the difficulty of listening to English and reading English subtitles would have required that the excerpts be kept very short. There was not enough class time to break the movie up into shorter segments or to replay sections, which might have been necessary had the movie been shown with English subtitles. Using an English

soundtrack with English subtitles would have involved placing more emphasis on listening comprehension as well as vocabulary work which was not part of the overall aim of showing the movie. As King said, teachers should ask themselves what is most beneficial for the students and what is the best way to achieve the pedagogical goal (9) and the answer depends on the aims and objectives of showing the movie. As the movie was being shown as a way of developing interest and understanding of poetry, it was decided that the emphasis should be on students' understanding the message of the movie and the explanation of the poems given in the movie and for this reason, the movie was shown in English with Japanese subtitles. Key scenes were repeated with English subtitles to familiarize students with the vocabulary and language they would need to discuss and write about the poems later. Further explanation of the methodology will be given in the next section.

Finally, the specific activities used will be described in detail in the next section. At this stage, it is enough to say that in accordance with the previous studies, students were given activities to prepare them for watching the movie, limited tasks to perform while watching the movie, and an opportunity to respond both verbally and in writing to what they had seen.

## Section Two

### 1.  Classroom Practice

This section will explain the methodology adopted in the lessons and describe some of the activities assigned to the students. In terms of time scale, watching the movie, *Dead Poets Society*, took place over the course of four ninety-minute lessons from weeks 2–5 of the semester, with week 1 being used as an introduction. After watching the movie, students were asked to write an essay about the themes or characters in the movie. The next three classes, weeks 6–8, were spent reading and discussing three poems cited in the movie: "To the Virgins, To Make Much Of Time" by Robert Herrick, "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost and "Oh Me, Oh Life" by Walt Whitman. After that,

students were required to write an essay about the poems. The classes followed the personal growth approach described earlier with its emphasis on enabling students to respond on a personal level to the movie and the poems by relating what they saw and read to their own experience. In addition, in accordance with the ethos of learner-centered language teaching, students had ample opportunity to work in pairs and in groups, reflecting the belief that "ideas flow best when they are exchanged. Working alone, the student has no outlet for his or her thoughts, as part of a large group, no opportunity to express them. In small groups, it is possible to talk and listen" (Maley and Duff 3). In this way, the methodology employed supports the pedagogical aim of students interacting personally with the poems. The methodology used for watching the movie will be described first.

## 2.  Watching the Movie

One problem of showing a movie in the classroom has been identified as the need to create teaching materials to accompany the film (Katchen, screen 6). Fortunately, as *Dead Poets Society* is popular among language teachers, a lot of resources already exist. Specifically, I drew on the work of Ford who used the movie in a speaking and listening class and devised a series of worksheets including discussion questions and vocabulary activities. Although some of the activities were not useful for my purpose, they were easily adapted to suit a different context and were a valuable source of ideas and inspiration. When choosing activities, the aim was always to help the students understand the themes, especially the ideas of the central character Mr. Keating regarding poetry, as this would be relevant in the next stage of the project.

In the first class of the semester, the students were told that we would be watching a movie set in an American boys' school in the late 1950s after which they would write an essay about the themes of the movie. At this point, useful literary analysis terms such as plot, theme, character and setting were introduced to the students. This was an opportunity to familiarize students with concepts they would need

when talking and writing about the movie and which we would return to later in the semester when studying short stories.  The students then discussed questions relating to their own educational experience such as:

○ Was your high school very strict?
○ Did your high school have a traditional or more modern teaching style?
○ Did your parents put pressure on you to study hard?
○ Do you think there is too much pressure on Japanese high school students?
○ Have you ever wanted to do something but your parents would not allow it?

These questions were designed to activate students' current knowledge and previous experience of the issues that would be presented in the movie and establish a connection between their own lives and the problems faced by the characters.  For homework in week 1, students were given some background information about the movie and a vocabulary exercise to look up the meaning of key words including culturally specific words, such as "boarding school" and "Ivy League," and words relevant to the themes and characters, such as "conservative" "rebellious" and "extrovert."

  Viewing the movie began in week 2.  Before beginning, students read a brief summary of the first few scenes on the movie.  Students were given two main tasks to do while viewing and these tasks remained the same every week.  The first was to make notes about the main characters, their personality, what happened to them and how they changed.   The aim of this was to get students to focus on character and character development, an important aspect of literary analysis and a possible essay topic for students later.  The second task was connected to the five poetry lessons taught by Mr. Keating during the movie.  It was explained to the students that each lesson has a "message": something Mr. Keating wants to teach the students, not

just about poetry, but also about life.  In each lesson, there is a quotation from a poem to illustrate the message Keating is trying to convey.  Focusing the students on the message of each lesson and the context of each poem was important in helping them reach an understanding of the meaning of the poem later on.

Two excerpts were shown in the first week of viewing.  For each one, in addition to the two main tasks, students were given one or two questions to check they had understood what was happening.  For example, in the first excerpt, we see an argument between one of the boys and his father so the students were asked: "What did Neil and his father argue about?"  As the students were watching with Japanese subtitles, they had no problem with these comprehension questions.  Other questions were designed to help them understand the themes, especially the message of the lessons.  For example, when watching excerpt two, which shows Mr. Keating's first lesson, they were asked: "Why does Mr. Keating show the boys old photos of former pupils at the school?"  Students had the opportunity to discuss their answers before the excerpt was re-played followed by further discussion.  Although the movie was subtitled in Japanese, these thematic questions were not so easy to grasp thus, guided questions, re-playing the important scenes and giving students the opportunity to discuss their ideas with classmates were essential "scaffolding"[1] for the students to help them achieve the task.

For homework in week 2, students were given a cloze exercise using a key speech from Mr. Keating's first class[2].  As they had viewed the film with subtitles, this exercise gave them the opportunity to engage with the dialogue in English.  The speech included the phrases "carpe diem" and "seize the day" which were key to the movie's overall theme.  Students were also given some vocabulary activities to prepare them for the next section of the movie and some discussion questions to prepare for the next class.  Examples of questions included:

○ What are the differences between Mr. Keating's teaching methods and those of the other teachers?

○ Have you ever had a teacher like Mr. Keating?
○ What do you think is the main message of the first section of the film?
○ Who is the most interesting pupil?

The questions allowed them to respond personally to what they had seen and to relate the movie to their own experience. Preparing their answers for homework gave students the chance to formulate their ideas and express them in English. It was hoped that having the opportunity to prepare in this way would help them to participate more actively in class discussions.

Subsequent classes followed the same pattern. Two or three excerpts from the movie were shown and students continued to complete the character development worksheets and focus on Mr. Keating's message in each lesson. Homework activities varied slightly. There were usually some vocabulary exercises to focus on language useful for writing about the themes of the movie. In addition, students were either asked to prepare answers to discussion questions or to summarize the movie so far.

In lesson 5, at the end of the movie, the students were asked to write an essay. The topic choices were as follows:

○ Which character was most interesting and why?
○ In your opinion, was Mr. Keating a good teacher?
○ Who was to blame for what happened to Neil?
○ After watching the movie, do you think it is a good idea to encourage High School students to be individuals and to think for themselves?

Aside from the first topic, students are asked to express their opinions on the themes of the movie such as attitudes to education, individualism versus conformity, parental and institutional pressure on school students, the right to make your own choices. After the essay assignment had been submitted, the class focus shifted to the poetry

introduced in the movie.

## 3. Studying the poems

As mentioned above, three poems were selected for study. Following the Carter and Long personal growth model mentioned earlier, students were encouraged to respond personally to the poems based on their own experience and to find their own meaning through discussion with classmates. One of the ideas from the movie, in terms of the study of poetry, is that students should learn to think for themselves and not simply accept the opinions of others. I wanted to emphasize this idea and also discourage the students from searching for the "meaning" of the poem as if only meaning were possible. As Wei says, "in literary works, meaning can be interpreted differently by each person, and by the same person at various moments in his or her life" (par 8), while Maley and Duff see the study of poetry as motivating precisely because "no single interpretation will ever be wholly satisfactory" so all students can feel that their ideas and opinions are valid (9). The methodology for each poem was slightly different so each poem will be described in turn.

The first poem, "To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time" is introduced at the beginning of the movie, during the first lesson taught by Mr. Keating, and connects with the theme of "Seize the Day." The aim of studying this poem was to get students thinking about the idea of universal themes in literature. Students were asked to read the poem for homework. At the start of the lesson, the relevant scene from the movie was re-shown (00 : 11 : 17–00 : 16 : 39) in order to create a context for the poem. Scenes were re-played with English subtitles as it was assumed students were now familiar with the story and would not need the support of Japanese subtitles. After re-watching the scene, students were given eight questions to answer about the poem. For some questions, the answer could be found in the poem, for example:

○ Why does the poet say we should gather rosebuds today?

○ According to the poem, which is the best time of your life?

Other questions focused on some of the imagery and how it connected to meaning, for example:

　　　○ Why do you think the author chose the image of a rosebud?
　　　○ Why does the author refer to the sun?

At this stage, students were not specifically asked to consider how the poem might be related to the themes of the movie but simply to look at the poem as piece of writing.  However, by showing them the scene from the movie beforehand, it is likely the students were guided towards thinking of the poem in the context of the movie.  This approach does pose some problems and these will be described in the conclusion.  Students worked in pairs to answer the questions then shared their answers with another pair.  By monitoring and prompting where necessary, it was possible for all the groups to come up with answers to the questions themselves without being given the answers by the teacher.

　　　The concepts of "speaker" and "audience" were then introduced and students asked to identify the audience and the poet's message to the audience.  This was followed by group discussions on the following questions:

　　　○ Why do you think Mr. Keating chose this poem to read in his
　　　　first lesson?
　　　○ What message did he want to give the boys?

These questions were designed to get students thinking about universality and how the idea that life is short and there is no time to waste was relevant to readers in the 1600s, schoolboys in 1950s America and to their own lives.  Some students struggled to make the connection initially but most were able to understand the idea of the poem and its universal relevance.

The second poem, "The Road Not Taken," was used in the movie to emphasize the importance of individualism and making your own decisions regardless of others. The aim of using this poem was twofold: to get students to experience the poem in relation to their own lives and to introduce them to the possibility of different interpretations of poems. As before, students were asked to read the poem at home ahead of the class. At the start of lesson, they were given some personal experience questions to discuss in groups such as:

○ Have you ever made an important decision in your life?
○ Have you ever made a decision you regretted later?
○ Are you the kind of person who likes to take risks?

After the discussion, students re-watched the scene from the movie where the poem was quoted (00 : 21 : 00–00 : 26 : 46) and then, as before, asked questions about the poem such as:

○ What choice does the speaker have to make?
○ What does he choose to do?
○ How does he feel about his decision?

Question 3 allows students to come to different conclusions as to whether the speaker is happy with his decision or feels regret. When answering the questions, students are encouraged to explain why they think so with reference to lines from the poem, something that would be necessary later when they came to write about the poem. The students found this poem much easier to understand and talk about, possibly because they were able to relate it to their own experience of making choices. The students were asked to say what the "road" in the poem might represent and they had no problems recognizing the road in the wood as a metaphor for making choices in life. To further personalize the response to the poem, students were asked to discuss which road they would have taken and why.

Although in the context of the movie, the poem focuses on the

"road less traveled" line to reinforce the message about non-conformity, other interpretations are possible such as regret, the difficulty of making choices, the impossibility of knowing if we made the right choice. To help students think about other interpretations, they were given a selection of comments expressing different views about the poem from a poetry forum website[3] and asked to discuss which interpretation they most agreed with and why. The idea behind this was to illustrate that a poem can have more than one "meaning." Students engaged well with this activity and seemed to enjoy considering the different viewpoints and deciding which, if any, most closely reflected their own view.

This was reinforced with the third poem "Oh Me, Oh Life" which is quoted by Mr. Keating in his second lesson where his message is to think for yourself and be your own person. It comes at the end of a longer speech about the importance of studying poetry (01 : 03 : 33– 01 : 05 : 46) and it was the intention to analyse this speech with the students prior to looking at the Whitman poem and consider why we read poetry. However, due to the constraints of time, this was not possible. Consequently, students found this poem difficult to understand and discuss, possibly because the context and relevance was less clear than in the previous poems. The approach to this poem was to repeat the exercise of presenting students with multiple interpretations of the poem and asking them to say which one they most agreed with. On the whole, this poem was the least successful in achieving the goal of studying poetry with reference to the movie.

After studying the three poems, students were assigned the following essay questions:

○ Why do you think Mr. Keating quoted these poems to his students
○ Why are these poems still popular today?
○ Which of these poems do you like best and why?

Question 1 allowed the students to connect the poems to the themes of

the movie. Question 2 is a question about universal themes in literature and gave the students the opportunity to talk about one, two or all of the poems. Question 3 enabled them to give a purely personal response to the poems based on their own interpretation of it. All of the topics lend themselves to the five-paragraph essay format and students were able to write well-constructed essays about the poems. In accordance with the aims of the Sophomore reading and writing class to improve students' academic writing abilities, students were required to quote from the poems to support their answers. In this respect, Question 3 was the least successful as students wrote about their personal experience rather than directly about the poem they chose. Question 1 was not entirely successful as students focused more on the movie than on the poems.

### Conclusion

This paper has described an attempt to use a full-length feature film in a university reading and writing class as a "way in"to studying poetry in English. By studying poems set in the context of the movie, it was anticipated that students would be better able to understand the poems and might even find the experience enjoyable. In terms of this aim, the experiment can be judged a success from the students' point of view. As mentioned earlier, the movie *Dead Poets Society* had been shown in the Sophomore reading and writing class prior to this study and, based on student evaluations conducted by the teacher, had proved popular with students. This time, students were not asked if they had enjoyed watching the movie but if watching the movie had helped them to better understand and enjoy poetry. 20 out of 26 students said "Yes," 1 student said "No" with 5 responding they were "Not Sure." Of course, this is hardly scientific, as students tend not to give critical, negative responses in evaluations even when their responses are anonymous as in this case. In addition, the students had no other experience of studying poetry in English as a basis for comparison. To better judge the effectiveness of using the movie, if this project were repeated, it should be done with two separate classes, each

studying the same poems, one using the movie and one without, then the results from each class could be compared. Alternatively, after studying the three poems from the movie, students could study other poems *not* referred to in the movie and then consider if the movie did indeed enhance their understanding and enjoyment.

From a pedagogical viewpoint, three conclusions can be drawn from this experiment. First of all, the main goal of the study was to enable students to reach a sufficient understanding of the poems to be able to write about them in the form of an academic essay. In terms of this goal, the study can be seen as partially successful. Most of the students were able to write a 2–3 page academic essay about the poems supported with quotations. This had not been achieved in the past. However, the essay assignment about the poems showed the problems of combining Carter and Long's personal growth model of literature study with the aims of academic writing. If students are encouraged to respond personally to the poems in class then it follows that they are likely to approach the essay assignment in the same way and write an essay based purely on their own personal experience—something they are not generally encouraged to do in academic writing. This can be seen as one limitation of the project and suggests it might be more appropriate to a different teaching context with more emphasis on reading and responding to literature rather than writing essays.

Secondly, due to time constraints, the personal growth model or reader response model (Kellem 12) was emphasized over the language／stylistics model, so the lack of focus on the language of the poems was not a limitation as such since it was not one of the pedagogical aims of the study. However, based on the kinds of questions students asked about the poems in class, they were interested in the language of the poems and it may have deepened their understanding and, possibly, their interest in the poems had we spent some time on activities designed to focus on language. As Mennim says, "a focus on language and style facilitates the personal growth model in the way that it helps students understand and interpret texts" (277). The adoption of a more integrated approach to the poems would have been beneficial in

this study.

Finally, regarding the learner-centered methodology, this study can be judged successful in the sense that students did have the opportunity to share their ideas about the poems with classmates in small group discussions, finding meaning in the poems and resolving questions they had by working collaboratively. The class was not conducted in the traditional teacher-centered style with the teacher handing down meaning to the students. By following this method, I believe students did come to understand that works of literature are open to various interpretations, that readers bring their own experience to poetry and that they, as readers, are capable of doing this. However, a true learner-centered approach to teaching literature emphasizes that students should be free to respond to the texts in their own way. As Wei says, "when the focus of teaching shifts from a top-down teacher-knowledge approach to the participatory student-response approach, the meanings of literary texts become personal through spontaneous reaction and direct response of the learners" (par 19). By connecting the poems so closely to the movie context, it could be argued that student reaction was not entirely spontaneous. Their responses could have been constrained by the meaning assigned to the poem by the character of Mr. Keating in the movie; they may have felt that other responses were not acceptable or even possible. Although attempts were made to expose students to varied interpretations of the poems, true learner autonomy, a basic tenet of the learner-centered approach, would have given students complete freedom to interact with the poems and form their own opinions without their response being skewed by the movie. To address this limitation, in future, the poems studied should not be confined to the three poems from the movie. Instead, these should be used as a starting point; a chance for the students to build their confidence and experience of interacting with poetry and reaching their own meaning in collaboration with class-mates. Following that, students could be introduced to other poems, not from the movie, and allowed to respond to these freely and without constraints, in the true spirit of a learner-centered approach to the

study of literature.

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**Other Materials**

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