

**Throw away the Textbook and Get a Paperback Instead:  
Reading García Márquez Short Stories and Sandra Cisneros's *La casa en  
Mango Street* in Spanish with Limited Vocabulary and Grammatical  
Knowledge<sup>1</sup>**

**Akira Watanabe**

*University of Yamanashi*

*awatanab@gmail.com*

Abstract:

In this essay, the author would like to share his experiences of reading Gabriel García Márquez's *Doce cuentos peregrinos* (*Strange Pilgrims*) and Sandra Cisneros' *La casa en Mango Street* (originally written and published in English as *The House of Mango Street*) in Spanish language classrooms at two leading universities in the Kanto region. These readings appeared to be a positive experience for the students, most of whom encountered either Latin American or US Hispanic literature for the first time. They not only learn the language itself, but also get acquainted with the socio-political context of the book at the same time. As most of the students start to study Spanish only after they enter the university, their grammatical knowledge and vocabulary are limited, but with slow-paced but proper, directed guidance, they can still reach a good level of understanding, and perhaps most importantly, they acquire confidence to read something in a foreign language, either in English or Spanish.

第二外国語のスペイン語の授業の中で、優れた文学作品を取り上げることには、どのような意義があるのだろうか。そして効果的な読解のためには、どのような工夫が必要だろうか。本稿は、関東圏の大学におけるガブリエル・ガルシア＝マルケスの『十二の遍歴の物語』ならびにサンドラ・シスネロスの『マンゴー通りの家』スペイン語版の講読の授業実践例を紹介し、文法的・語彙的知識の限られた学生でも、教員による適切な指導があれば、辞書を使って文章を十分に理解し、さらには作品の背景となる社会について学ぶことが可能であること、そしてこうした授業における読みの経験そのものが、

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<sup>1</sup> This title is inspired by Shūji Terasawa's famous phrase, "Throw away your books, go out to the town!" Obviously, however, it is not my intention to disregard any textbook or their authors. Instead, my aim is to emphasize the importance of going out of textbook sphere and getting into a 'real world' literature.

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英語・スペイン語を問わず、外国語で何かを読むということについての自信につながる  
ことといった、さまざまな学習効果があることを指摘した。

キーワード：スペイン語・ガブリエル・ガルシア＝マルケス・サンドラ・シスネロス・  
短編小説・出版・辞書の活用

### **Teaching Spanish as a Second or Other Language in Japanese Universities**

Teaching Spanish as a second foreign language in Japanese universities is somewhat different from teaching English in the same educational environment. Spanish teachers have certain advantages and disadvantages compared to English teachers. Most of the students start studying the language only after they enter the university. Most of the time, this is an advantage because the class is relatively homogeneous in terms of the learning level, as they are all beginners. In addition, some are highly motivated, thanks to the music and other cultural assets that comes from Spanish-speaking countries and regions. For some, this is a new and fresh experience after having many not so pleasant experiences in learning English in high school. On the other hand, however, some of them are taking the course only because it is obligatory to study another foreign language in addition to English. There are also students who fall behind from the very start of the course, because they fail to understand (or to put it simpler, to accept) basic features of the language such as verb conjugations, or even the idea that nouns have a gender in Spanish.

Even when the positive sides of learning Spanish are stronger than the negative ones, the fact that most of the students only start learning Spanish at the age of 18 means that even for the very best students, it is not so easy to get to the level of reading something serious, as both their grammatical knowledge and vocabulary are far from adequate. Yet, at some good universities, students' intellectual level is so high that reading very basic textbooks are sometimes just too boring for them. That is when teachers like myself are tempted to take some good literature out of the library and try to use them in classrooms.

In this essay, I would like to share my experiences of teaching Spanish language through reading the original Spanish language version of Gabriel García Márquez's *Doce cuentos peregrinos* and *La casa en Mango Street*, a Spanish version of Sandra Cisneros' *The House of Mango Street* (translated into Spanish by Elena Poniatowska<sup>2</sup>) at the University of Tokyo and the

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<sup>2</sup> Poniatowska is one of the best-known contemporary female Mexican author/journalist who won the prestigious Premio Cervantes award in 2014.

Faculty of Law of the Keio University, respectively. In my opinion, those readings have been good experiences for the students, most of whom are encountering either Latin American or US Hispanic/Chicana literature for the first time in their lives, and have helped students to become acquainted with the socio-political context of the book, and while, of course, learning a little bit of Spanish.

Before moving to explain my own cases, I will briefly mention the importance of use of literature in the English classroom in Japanese universities, citing the champions of traditional reading-translation (*yakudoku*) method as well as what are commonly known as *Native* teachers here in Japan, i.e. native speakers of English, who contribute to this journal. I then explain my teaching methods and their consequences, according to my observations and feedback from students.

### **Background: Approaches to teaching and texts**

In Japan, there has been endless argument about the direction of university-level English education. One trend, set by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technologies, is that language learning should be more focused on communication, which seems to have become the mainstream now (MEXT n.d.; Jōchi CLT Project 2014). The traditional reading-translation method is often criticized by the followers of these communicative methods, as being insufficient to help students become capable users of the target language (see, for example, Shirai, (2014).

However, there still are champions of traditional reading-translation method. For example, Saito (2007) argues that in the process of second language acquisition, we neither have the young memory to memorize, nor the time that we spent learning the mother tongue, so we have to rely on grammar and its explanations in L1 to study the language systematically. On the other hand, Sugawara (2011) points out that his students at the University of Tokyo who have studied English under the so-called *communicative methods* in high school, are less capable in both understanding and pronunciation compared to previous generations, and they often lack self-confidence, and estimate their English as “incompetent” (p. 15-16). Sugawara explains this paradox in the following way: “despite the new policy’s emphasis on communication, firstly,

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students are not properly taught the correct pronunciation using phonetic symbols; secondly, sometimes they give up trying to improve their speaking ability, because they cannot compete anyway with those bilingual students who grew up abroad, especially in terms of fluency” (Sugawara 2011, p. 16).

Saito and Sugawara concur that students should not only study the grammar, but that L1 Japanese should be used as a learning tool, and that they should read and try to translate what they read into Japanese for a better understanding of the texts. The English department of the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Tokyo, where both have been members, recently launched a new textbook emphasizing “*kōyōyō eigo*”, or “English as liberal arts” (Nakao, 2013). While the University is also trying to improve their *communicative approach* section by starting new, small-sized classroom curriculum, this project is a bold move to emphasize that reading is as important as other language skills, such as speaking, listening, and writing.

### **Differing aims and approaches to using literary texts**

The philosophy driving this national group and this journal may have some ideas in common with Saito and Sugawara’s concerns, but appears slightly different from their approach, as most of the contributors to the journal are from Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs) (Addison, 2013a and 2013b; Bibby, 2012; Joritz-Nakagawa, 2012; Judge, 2012; McIlroy, 2012). While the use of literature is nothing new in the Japanese classroom, its use by native teachers is rare, as they may tend to focus on other issues such as students’ communicative proficiency (McIlroy, 2012). My understanding is that it is also a movement toward what is often called *content-based language teaching*, that students should learn more than just the language itself. Bibby, for example, discusses several different models of teaching literature: the cultural, language, personal growth, and context models (Bibby, 2012). Apart from learning the language itself, reading literature can broaden students’ views; help them get to know other countries, their cultures and societies; and then return to the case of Japan to think about their own culture and society.

This content-based approach can be undertaken in several different settings, and perhaps the most traditional case in the Japanese classroom is the English language class given by Japanese teachers. There are also attempts by *native* teachers such as many of the contributors to this journal. What I discuss herein is a third case: reading Latin American and U.S. Hispanic

literature in Spanish with minimal knowledge of the language, and getting to know about those countries, regions or societies represented in these texts. The content of what we read in the classroom is particularly important in my case, as students often find it difficult to get motivated to learn Spanish. There are several reasons for this: it is not so easy to achieve something concrete in Spanish, such as speaking proficiency, as they study the language only for two years; and it is difficult for them to find opportunity to use the language in practice, likely less so than English. Also, if they struggle with a text, painstakingly consulting their dictionary and carefully examining its structure, and find out that the text says nothing really interesting, it will be quite disappointing. Teachers have to offer students a text which is rich in content and also readable.

I have taught in the Faculty of Law at Keio University and the University of Tokyo (commonly known in Japan as *Todai*) as a part-time lecturer for a number of years (at Keio since April 2006 and at *Todai* since September 2007), and have formulated certain methods (very primitive, for sure) of using suitable literature in those classes. I have used *La casa en Mango Street*, the original Spanish version of *The House of Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros<sup>3</sup>, for the 2nd year students in the Faculty of Law at Keio University, and *Doce cuentos peregrinos*, the last short stories collection of Gabriel García Márquez, in the *Intermediate Spanish as the third foreign language* course at the University of Tokyo. I discuss these experiences in the following two sections.

### **The story at Keio: Why should we read a paperback, instead of a textbook, if we are not at all good at Spanish?**

To read a paperback in Spanish with my students at Keio University sounded like a good idea. The Law Faculty of Keio is one of the best private schools in Japan and they should be capable of such a challenge after a year of studying grammar. However, there is a small problem: my class is supposed to be a lower level intermediate course, which is taken by those second (or even third and fourth) year students who had almost failed their Spanish course in the previous year. Most of them probably do not like to study the language, and some may even be quite

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<sup>3</sup> *The House on Mango Street* is also popular as a reading material in the English classroom at U.S. middle and high schools. For example, the Minnesota Literacy Council has several supplementary materials for the use of the book in the classroom (Carson-Padilla 2014).

traumatized by their experience thus far. Still, reading *La casa en Mango Street* is quite a nice way to get those students involved in the class.

The story takes place in a place called Mango Street, a poor Latino neighborhood, or *barrio*, in a big American city, and is narrated by the teenage protagonist, Esperanza, in the first person. It is difficult to define the style of *La casa en Mango Street*. It's a novel, but it also can be seen as a series of short, poetic, episodes that can be read as a collection of short stories. It is actually a suitable format for our classroom, as we can read a single text in two sessions at most. Sometimes it is not so easy to understand the text because expressions are so poetic: for example, the protagonist says her "mother's hair ... is the warm smell of bread before you bake it" (Cisneros 1984, p. 6), and her name, Esperanza, which in English means hope, while "in Spanish ... means too many letters" (p.10), and "(a)t school they say it funny as if syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth," although "in Spanish, my name is made out of softer something, like silver" (p. 11). However, I suggest that this is also a good experience for most of the students, as in many cases they have never read such rhetorical texts before, even in Japanese. It is also good to look at the world from the perspective of a teenage girl, as most of my students are male, and to imagine how people live in a place like Mango Street, the *barrio* where Mexican and other Hispanic migrants live.

At the beginning of the academic year, I give a brief review of grammatical knowledge for 4 or 5 weeks, focusing on the tenses and the meaning of each of them, and from then on, every week or two, we read a text from the book. I do not ask them to prepare for the class, just to read the text consulting a dictionary in the classroom for the first 45 minutes or so. I write down some of the words, mostly conjugated verbs, on the blackboard because they cannot find them in the dictionary as they are, and walk around the classroom answering their questions. It is a fairly primitive method, but even in Keio, there are students who are not used to consulting a dictionary when they read something in a foreign language. At first, some of the students appear perplexed and some of them are just sitting there, without moving their hands, but by around October, a few weeks after the start of the second semester (it takes time!), they are used to the rhythm of the class, and they get much better at using a dictionary, whereas at first, they sometimes could not even find certain words.

The fact that they are used to the rhythm I am trying to set in the classroom, and that those students who are shy at first and cannot talk to me, the teacher, become more open and

capable of asking me questions, are the most important achievements I can see myself. For example, at first they ask just for the meaning of a word or a phrase, but little by little they ask me more elaborated questions, for example, if the translation they did themselves are right or wrong. At the same time, the habit of consulting the dictionary remains, which can be an important skill for them in a long run.

Feedback from my students has been encouraging. One of the most pleasing comments was that one of them told me he bought the original English version of *Mango Street* and had started to read it. Another student told me it was the first time he read anything other than a textbook in a language other than Japanese; surprisingly, he hadn't read any books in English prior to this course. Another student noted that the class was 'fun' in the feedback, although my class is not meant to be like that(!) - I just ask them to consult dictionaries themselves, read a page or two, and try to understand what is happening. While revising this article, I asked this student via email for clarification. He replied immediately and explained the reason why he liked the class. The response is useful to consider in full:

*“In most language courses offered at the university, teachers assign us a textbook, and gives emphasis on studying grammar and learning certain basic vocabulary until the course is over. However, in Prof. Watanabe’s class, we (students) are actively involved in it by consulting the dictionary and reading a ‘book’ written in Spanish. That was a fresh experience for me. I felt that the process of reading a book written in a foreign language, looking up unknown words in the dictionary, was such a thrilling experience, similar to solving puzzles. Reading the book also led me to think about the place where the story is taking place and the life of its characters. In other words, the reading gave me a chance to envision the life of the protagonist of the different race in a foreign country at certain age, and the way she felt and thought, which sometimes even led me to re-experience what she does in the book. It was a certain kind of intercultural exchange and was very exciting one. That is the reason why I felt I was having fun in your class”* (Personal communication, June 1, 2014).

I myself never thought that my method could be classified as *active learning*, but it may well be a good example of the fact that primitive teaching methods are sometimes quite

compatible with the aims of those modern methods such as active learning. Of course, I am sure that not all the students felt the same way, but we cannot satisfy everyone in the classroom, and it is good to know that at least some of them are approving of one's way of teaching.

### **The story at *Todai*: Reading García Márquez's original text with only basic grammatical knowledge**

I have been teaching a somewhat peculiar class at the University of Tokyo for several years: intermediate level Spanish as the *third* foreign language, which means that the students study English, another language (they can choose French, German, Russian, Chinese, Korean, Italian, and Spanish, as the second foreign language), and are still willing to learn Spanish. Most students are likely capable language learners and may be considered '*genko otaku*' or 'language nerds', so the class is very fast, covering one or two verbal tenses (or topics peculiar to the language such as reflexive verbs) per week.

After covering the grammar in seven weeks or so, we start reading short stories from García Márquez's *Doce cuentos peregrinos*, the last collection of the author's short stories, which García Márquez himself said was the short story collection closest to that which he had wanted to publish. The book was published in 1992, 500 years after the 'discovery' of the Americas. All the stories take place in Europe and the main characters are people from Latin American countries or from Caribbean islands. Although my favorite pieces are "*La santa* (The saint)" and "*María dos Prazeres*", those stories are relatively long so sometimes due to time constraints, I have to choose shorter ones, such as "*El espanto de agosto* (The ghost of August)", "*Me alquilo para soñar* (I sell my dream)", or "*El avión de la bella durmiente* (Sleeping beauty and the airplane)". The last piece may be particularly pertinent to Japanese students as it is based on a short story by Yasunari Kawabata, "The House of Sleeping Beauties."

Of course, it is not an easy text, and even the best students have problems understanding phrases such as the following:

*"...durante años pensé que Margarito Duarte era el personaje en busca de autor que los novelistas esperamos durante toda una vida, y si nunca dejé que me encontrara fue porque el final de su historia me parecía inimaginable* (García Márquez 1992, p. 55).

(The English translation is as follows: ... for years I thought Margarito Duarte was the character in search of an author that we novelists wait for all our lives, and if I never allow him to find me it was because the end of his story seemed unimaginable (García Márquez 1993, p. 37).

The García Márquez passage is complicated, but it provokes, and attracts readers into the narrative. In fact, this is one of the key passages of the entire story and this question will be answered in a heartwarming way at the end. At the end of the semester, it is clear from the feedback that students are proud to have read García Márquez, perhaps one of the best known Nobel laureate authors, in his own language.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this essay, I have explained how I use good works of literature in my Spanish classrooms, as further examples of the use of literature in teaching language. My method in Keio is perhaps rudimentary, but it has worked in my classes, and perhaps I should add that I reached this simple method only after some trial and error process. Of course, I always pay attention so that students can get into the text as smoothly as possible, giving them grammatical orientation and offering adequate clues when they have some problems understanding a word or a phrase. Once it is on track, students can read the text by themselves and I only have to correct their mistakes or give some hints when they face some difficult expressions.

My classes at the University of Tokyo are slightly different from that of Keio. While the motivation of students at the beginning may well be higher, the texts we read in class, García Márquez's short stories, are also more difficult. In both cases we read texts that tell us about the life of the characters, and the people represented by them. Those texts expose students to the rich cultural heritage of the language<sup>4</sup>, and offer a means of transporting students to where the story is

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, it may be questionable to include *La casa en Mango Street* in the category of Spanish language literature, as it was written first in English and Cisneros herself admits that her Spanish is not as good as her English (Rodriguez 2012). However, I dare to say that the book can be included into the category of the Latin American literature in a broader sense, because the story takes place in a *barrio*, the neighborhood in a U.S. megalopolis where many Spanish-speaking people lived (and perhaps still live). It is also worth mentioning that Poniatowska's translation is a very good one. As for the Latin American heritage in the United States, I would like to quote the former Mexican president, Ernesto Zedillo, who made the following polemical speech in Chicago, where Cisneros was born. He said in the 1997 National Council of La Raza:

taking place. The stories enable students to think more about those places, or about something more universal. That kind of exposure can be an eye-opening event for those young students, and as a teacher, I hope that those experiences have a long term impact on their education generally, and on their future careers, as well as their learning experience of the Spanish language.

#### Author notes

Akira Watanabe has taught Spanish Language and Latin American Studies at several universities in Kanto region, before getting hired as an associate professor at the University of Yamanashi in 2012. He obtained B.A. and M.A. at the Department of Latin American Studies at the University of Tokyo, and also studied at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, El Colegio de México, and Yale University. His research focuses on the local politics of the State of Yucatán and the migration from the region to California, U. S. He has also written essays about Japanese culture and language in Spanish, in journals and books published in Mexico, Spain, and Venezuela.

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<sup>4</sup> “I have proudly affirmed that the Mexican nation extends beyond the territory enclosed by its borders” (Fonte 2005, 10). Indeed, the number of Mexican-origin Hispanics have reached 33.7 million in 2012 (Gonzalez-Barrera and Lopez, 2013), which is more than 25% of the Mexican population. Thus, books like *The House on Mango Street* are very important if you want to study about Mexico or Latin America in a broader sense.

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