

*Challenges on Teaching and Learning Japanese Literature in Brazilian Universities*

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**Abstract**

This paper presents five different challenges related to Japanese literature teaching and learning in the context of higher education in Brazil. It shows the result of two years (2016-2018) of activity teaching the disciplines Japanese Literature I to IV at one of the Brazilian public universities that offer undergraduate studies in Japanese Language and Literature. The five challenges identified (language proficiency, literary proficiency, adaptation to new technologies, content and format updating, and professors' level of interaction with students and colleagues from other institutions) are commented on and supported by facts observed during the teaching period. Mulhern's "On Teaching Japanese Literature" (1981) and Collie & Slater's "Literature in the Language Classroom" (1987) served as a theoretical basis for the development of the reflections here presented, and this paper aims at contributing to a more up-to-date approach on the given context.

Keywords: Japanese Literature, Higher Education, Literature Teaching

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## Introduction

In 2016, I was working for another university as a Japanese Literature professor, and I published a paper entitled "Reflections on teaching Japanese literature in the university" in Portuguese in a Brazilian literature journal<sup>1</sup>. From 2016 to 2018 (when I had to move to another city), I decided to test those reflections in practice. This paper revisits and updates the first text, adding new thoughts and the experiences I had in these two years.

This paper presents five different challenges related to Japanese literature teaching and learning in the context of higher education in Brazil. Still, I think that they are not restricted to our country. These challenges are language proficiency, literary proficiency, profiting from new technologies, content and format updating, and the level of interaction of students and professors, as well as among universities.

## Theory

There is a lot of research on foreign language teaching in Brazil, at various levels, but when it comes to research on the teaching/learning of foreign language literature, in comparison, the amount is visibly reduced. The main reason for this is that there is much more demand for language teaching than for foreign literature teaching, which is mainly restricted to higher education. Our focus is Japanese literature, but we found a ground-breaking doctoral dissertation, authored by Brazilian researcher Elisabetta Santoro (2007, p. 13), whose title in English is "From the indivisibility of language teaching and literature: a proposal for the teaching of Italian as a foreign language in courses of Letters," in which she exposes the attachment of Letters courses to the tradition of still separating linguistic and literary studies. Although her work refers to the Italian language and literature, it brings relevant inputs that well serve the research of teaching any foreign languages and their literature in Brazil.

Collie and Slater (1987), in their book *Literature in the language classroom – A resource book with ideas and activities*, point out some interesting reflections. Their approach is not limited to higher education. It has a broader scope, stimulating the use of literary texts as authentic material that promotes cultural and linguistic enrichment and provokes the reader's personal involvement with the text. Studies that show the benefits of bringing literature into the language classes are not rare; nevertheless, if we search for works that deal specifically with Japanese literature, the quest becomes more difficult. In Brazil, Silva Júnior and Souza (2013), writing on contemporary literature in the Japanese language classroom (also not restricted to higher education), share a positive experience in having literary texts as tools in the language classes. Nevertheless, we did not find any work dealing with literature classes – these restricted to the university. In the next section, there is an overview of Japanese literature disciplines of the Japanese language undergraduate courses in Brazilian universities.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the paper was published with modifications that were not allowed, containing awkward mistakes and lacking parts (reason why it is not in the references list, having also been object of a lawsuit for moral damages that has been judged in favor of the author).

## Japanese Undergraduate Courses In Brazil – Overview

There are today in Brazil eight public universities offering undergraduate courses in the Japanese Language. There is a recently created course in a private institution, but it was impossible to find information about its program and disciplines. The following table shows the universities in chronological order of the courses' starting year, followed by the total hours of Japanese-related content (Japanese culture, language, literature, history), Japanese literature disciplines' total hours, and their percentage. It is important to note that this percentage is relative; it is not mirrored in the total number of hours of the course (which also contains other disciplines that are not considered here – Linguistics, Literary Theory, Comparative Literature, Methodology of Research and other general disciplines). The data was taken from the Japan Foundation's last published report.

University	Starting year	Hours of Japanese-related content	Hours of Japanese Literature	Relative percentage
USP	1964	960	360	37,5%
UFRJ	1979	990	240	24,24%
UnB	1983	1080	240	22,22%
UFRGS	1986	1020	180	17,64%
UNESP	1992	690	240	34,78%
UERJ	2003	960	240	25%
UFPR	2009	660	120	18,18%
UFAM	2011	975	195	20%

Table 1. Updated numbers from the last report by the Japan Foundation in São Paulo (see references – [https://fjisp.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/LIVRETO\\_Dados\\_ensino\\_lingua\\_japonesa\\_v10.pdf](https://fjisp.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/LIVRETO_Dados_ensino_lingua_japonesa_v10.pdf))

The universities with the highest relative percentage of Japanese Literature disciplines are the ones in São Paulo. Santoro (2007), when analyzing the documents of the creation of the graduate course in Italian at the University of São Paulo, states that literary studies were more valued than linguistics studies – so that most of the students had to know the language well before starting the course, having it as a pre-requisite. Being this the comprehension in the foundation of the language courses in the University of São Paulo, it is easy to understand the privileged role that literature plays in such a context, even though the Japanese undergraduate course was created only after the Italian course.

There are two kinds of Japanese undergraduate courses in Brazil: one is called "licenciatura," which forms Japanese teachers; the other is "bacharelado," and graduates in this modality may dedicate themselves to research, continuing their studies, or translation. How many graduates have jobs related to Japanese is a relevant question, but not to be addressed here. Some institutions offer only "licenciatura"; others offer the possibility of choosing between "licenciatura" or "bacharelado." The university with a lower relative percentage of Japanese literature disciplines (UFRGS) differs from the others because it offers only "bacharelado" specifically to form translators. This is visibly why, from a considerable amount of hours of Japanese-related content, the balance language-literature tends more on the first one. Nevertheless, some of their graduates have had their translations of Japanese literary

texts published recently, amidst a growing interest in Japanese literature verified in Brazil in the last decade.

The other courses keep an average of 18% to 25% of relative percentage reserved to the study of Japanese literature, and it reflects their tendency to focus more on language – some of them offer only "licenciatura"; the others, that offer either "licenciatura" or "bacharelado," have a standard curriculum for both modalities, just adding pedagogical disciplines to the "licenciatura" track.

## **Challenges on Teaching and Learning Japanese Literature**

From a study concluded in 2016 about teaching Japanese literature, we felt the need to expand the question, focusing on challenges instead of difficulties and adding the perspective of learning. In practical terms, which main challenges could be cited in this context? We kept the same list, emphasizing that it is not exhaustive: challenges of language proficiency, literary proficiency, profiting from new technologies (more than just adapting to them), content and format updating, and professors' level of interaction with students and colleagues from other institutions. Although they all intersect to a greater or lesser extent, we will discuss each separately to organize our reasoning better.

### **1) Challenge of Language Proficiency**

Indeed, one cannot limit Japanese literature study only to those who are proficient in Japanese (Mulhern, 1981, p. 68). If this were the case, researchers from other fields (anthropology, history, social sciences, etc.) could not use Japanese literature as a source. However, for students of the Japanese language course, language proficiency is not only presumed but required. If it were possible to combine language and literature teaching fluidly, contrary to the tradition mentioned earlier, it could be a step ahead. However, as language and literature continue separated into different disciplines in all the analyzed curricula, we cannot count on it.

All courses foresee the beginning of Japanese literature classes starting from the 5th period when students have already completed four semesters of the Japanese language. The problem is that students usually start their course without knowing anything about Japanese. In most universities, students must first learn *hiragana* and *katakana*, and it takes most of the first semester. After four semesters, they must have studied about six hundred ideograms. Considering that the number of *jōyōkanji* (frequently used ideograms, listed in 2010 by the Japanese Ministry of Education and Culture) is 2,136, reading literary texts in Japanese is a painful and discouraging task, as students waste a lot of time searching for meanings of words in the dictionary - not to mention, of course, the struggle in understanding not yet studied sentence constructions and the lack of knowledge of cultural elements in the text.

Coping with the frustration generated at this point of the course is a more significant challenge for students than for professors. Working only on texts in Japanese will scare the students; using only translations, justifying that the study is purely literary and not linguistic, is a fallacy; the experience in class showed that using both texts, in Japanese and their translation into Portuguese, is a satisfactory solution for studying language and literature in the same activity. We consider this medium the most

effective, understanding that literary and linguistic studies can and should be integrated. The study of translation techniques may also be included, even if it is not a translation course. Students usually show more interest in literature when they feel they can understand it when there is a bridge-gapping from known information (Portuguese) to new information (Japanese).

Starting with contemporary literature texts (instead of classical, medieval, or modern) may make the students more secure. As most of the disciplines are arranged in chronological order, students usually have the first contact with Japanese literature through texts that are distant not only in space but in time, deepening the gap between them. In my context, this suggestion of a change in the curriculum was warmly welcomed by the students but intensely tackled by other professors, in whose opinion "such a change in order denotes amateurism and ignorance of the matter." Curriculum flexibility can be a very delicate subject.

## **2) Challenge of Literature Proficiency**

Chieko Irie Mulhern (1981, p. 65), writing from the perspective of a Japanese literature professor at a university in the United States, comments that, along with the difficulties of methodology, content, and objectives, there is the fact that many students who "do not know about Asia or even Japan" are enrolled in the course; there are also students of courses other than Letters and "have no experience or interest in purely literary analysis"; students of Comparative Literature who "have much training in sophisticated analytical methods"; and students of East Asian Studies "more eager to study Japan than literature." In other words, the class is a heterogeneous group with different motivations and instruments.

It is not common in Brazil to have students out of the Letters' field in literature classes. More homogeneous groups are usually easier to manage. Making the ones who know the most help the ones who have more difficulty can be a way to make everyone's abilities develop. But this is still very general. Just as little knowledge of the language hinders the study of literature, little literature theory knowledge also does significant damage. It is not rare to see Japanese literature taught with the instruments of the Western tradition, the weight of concepts formulated in Europe and the United States, which do not fit the Eastern literatures. It is not a proposal to make this literature exotic. On the contrary: it is a proposal to analyze it with the appropriate instruments.

From the Japanese undergraduate courses in Brazil, only the UFPR (Federal University of Paraná) has a course entitled "Theory of Literature in Japanese." It covers "studies of literary genres and terminology applied to the study of elements of literary language. More than genres or terminology, studying Japanese literary theory and the concepts that are peculiar to it, as well as the process of elaboration of these concepts, also concerning the study of Japanese philosophy, history, and culture." Even if a class has a great deal of knowledge of literary theory, it will still lack elements to study Japanese literature, more specifically in undergraduate courses.

### 3) Challenge of Profiting from New Technologies

Any student of the Japanese language can benefit from numerous resources as applications or computer programs, using technology to learn from the syllabaries to *kanji*, from vocabulary to grammar structures (even separating them by groups according to the levels of the *Japanese Language Proficiency Test - JLPT*), quizzes, games, *online* dictionaries. However, when I searched for applications or programs that could contribute to the study of Japanese literature, I did not find any – at least not made for foreign learners. If they exist, they should become more easily reachable; if they do not, it is time to start producing them.

The pandemic in 2020 forced professors and students to a new dynamic in teaching and learning. Online classes became the only viable format. One may say that this shift represented the definitive insertion of technology in class. But using Zoom, GoogleMeets, or any other instrument to deliver the same class format (not in presence, but online) does not represent the profiting from new technologies to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Besides the general tools that can be used in online classes – forums, chats, collaborative platforms (like Padlet or blogging websites), and quiz creators (like Quizziz or Kahoot!), to mention some – there should be a database gathering open-access educational material of Japanese Literature.

A database like this needs to be fed with already produced materials. These resources (lesson plans, presentation slides, exercises, debate scripts, translations, interactive materials, and so on) could be shared by professors who are teaching the subject. On the other hand, sharing has to do with challenge number 5, to be addressed later in this work.

As for the classes I conducted from 2016 to 2018, I tried using the institutional Moodle platform for online courses, but students neither liked it nor knew how to use it. I also tried the Edmodo platform, but without success. Students preferred to use Facebook groups for sharing class materials. Still, since not everybody wanted to have a Facebook account, I had to rely on multiple media, and it was tiring and somewhat messy. After the pandemic, maybe most of the students and professors are more acquainted with the platforms.

### 4) Challenge of Content and Format Updating

Mulhern (1981, p. 66), when addressing the issue of content, mentions the fact that the same authors are studied, and mostly the same books, because of the translations available - and translations are often affected by market issues. She mentions the few works written by women translated into English and calls literature professors to the responsibility of offering variety in the reading lists indicated to students. In Brazil, Silva Júnior e Souza (2013, p. 11) found no women among the four Japanese writers most translated into Portuguese.<sup>2</sup> Today's numbers are perhaps a little different, with some titles more by Haruki Murakami, putting him ahead of Tanizaki and Oe, but certainly not yet a woman among the most translated. However, there are translations

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<sup>2</sup> “According to the cited survey, the most translated writers into the Portuguese language are: Mishima Yukio (15 translated works), Tanizaki Jun'ichiro (11), Oe Kenzaburo (11) and Murakami Haruki (11).” (Silva Júnior e Souza 2013, p. 11)

of books by Sei Shônagon, Kawakami Hiromi, Yoshimoto Banana, and translations of short stories by Ichiyo Higuchi and Sawako Ariyoshi, as far as we know.

Still, concerning this variety, I need to share a personal experience: we study classical poetry, but not contemporary poets, like Kiwao Nomura. Maybe it happens because his work is too dense and difficult to translate. Translating poetry has more obstacles than translating prose, explaining the lack of translations of Nomura and other contemporary Japanese poets in Brazil.

It is relatively recent that research of literature on the fringes of the canon has been valued. In some cases, as in the use of literature for language teaching, the canon is replaced by other more digestible texts (Silva Júnior & Souza, 2013, p.17). It explains why writers like Nomura are still unknown. Outside this objective, the study of authors that do not belong in the canon takes place primarily in graduate studies, since in undergraduate studies, even with the participation of some students in research groups, the course timetable is limited, and, naturally, only the most famous writers are contemplated.

Being updated means also being inclusive – and inclusivity refers to gender, genre, and subject. Professors have the challenge of balancing their choices of texts, bringing together far-famed writers and not yet translated relevant ones. On the other hand, students have the challenge of imprinting a more personal touch to their autonomous study by searching for preferred themes, genres, and writers for their readings outside the duties of the Japanese Literature discipline. Students' suggestions might even become part of the course syllabus if the professor is willing to make a free start. Again, if such a degree of flexibility seems too much, the professor may allow one or two suggestions from the students and choose the primary texts.

## **5) Challenge of Interaction**

The International Conference of Japanese Studies in Brazil happens biennially to exchange experiences and promote theoretical-methodological discussions. Universities may hold local events and workshops on Japan and Japanese language topics, but a more in-depth debate on literature teaching has not been noticeable recently.

The most recent material found in a debate on the teaching of literature in Brazil is from 2005, from the proceedings of the III International Congress of Japanese Studies in Brazil, in which professors Sonia Longhi Ninomiya and Luiza Nana Yoshida, from UFRJ and USP, respectively, participated in a round table discussion on the teaching of Japanese literature. Ninomiya addressed the updating of the flowchart of the UFRJ's Japanese Literature course and the content of the reorganized disciplines. Yoshida presented teaching and research at the undergraduate and graduate levels of USP and raised some challenges that we felt in our teaching practice and that were highlighted here in this work: reconciling literature for knowledge with literature for pleasure and the "ignorance of Japanese culture" – both related to the matter of literature proficiency - and also the "problem of writing/language" - this one related to the challenge of language proficiency (Yoshida, 2005, pp. 276-277).

Fifteen years later, we still face the same and other challenges. What has been done in each institution to deal effectively with them? If there were a net through which students, professors, researchers, everyone dealing with Japanese literature learning and teaching could interact regularly, maybe we could find new solutions or elaborate new strategies that could benefit everyone. However, before we create this net, we should ask: in each institution, are the professors listening to the students – and vice-versa? It seems more useful to nurture this interaction domestically before we step out to an interinstitutional initiative.

From 2016 to 2018, I had tried to hear the students' perspectives on Japanese Literature as a discipline. Some of them face it as one more discipline in which they can learn the language – literature being just a means for it. Some consider it a chance to learn about Japanese culture (but, even though culture and literature are connected, they are not the same thing). Others take it as a discipline on translation more than on literature itself. But what is Japanese Literature – the discipline? What do we want/need from it? How many hours should we separate for it? We should be talking – and listening – about it. We may unite all these perspectives and assemble them, putting them to the test – and to the text.

## **Conclusion**

This work is an effort to reflect on Japanese literature teaching and learning in Brazil in the university context. Maybe in other countries, other Japanese Literature professors and students struggle with similar issues, and sharing these reflections could ignite connections and promote exchanges. Solutions may arise from experience sharing.

If it is possible to study language and literature without separating them, escaping from the traditional approach, it seems that proficiency challenges (linguistic and literary) can be more quickly resolved. The updating and profiting from new technologies go together, the first being theoretical and the second, practical, applied to the need to correspond to the teaching and learning in the 21st century. Both are benefited by sharing issues and information in the interaction process.

It seems that everything begins, in fact, with interaction. Listening to the students makes all the difference. During two years of experience (2016-2018), it was clear that they need to be heard. Letting them speak and participate is a way of improving their autonomy and personalizing their study of Japanese Literature. It is not aimed at making things easier for them to pass with a good grade – it is aimed at meeting their needs and finding an acceptable way to promote better profit for teachers and learners.

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