Teaching about India with *Slumdog Millionaire*
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Background

Indian authors – writing in English – have recently won a handsome share of the English world's most important literary prizes. In fact, since 2000, no less than 5 different authors from India (or of Indian descent, writing about Indian themes) have won the Booker Prize, the Pulitzer Prize (fiction) and the Nobel Prize for Literature.

This is an amazing achievement. Surely, such an Indian dominance of English language literary awards would indicate that Indian writers, Indian topics, and Indian culture now represent a significant and important contribution to the culture of "English" and the world.

In reality, despite these recent literary achievements, Indian writing has continued to occupy a rather minor place in the popular conception of English language and culture. In Japanese universities, this minor status of Indian writing and culture is reflected in its absence from most English language and social studies courses. Few courses in Japan contain Indian content.

However, recent events have raised the profile of Indian culture to new levels. In Japan, in the past 5 or 6 years, we have seen a yoga boom, an Indian economic boom, and the hit movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, which won 8 Academy Awards in 2008. This film's success seemed to give Indian topics and Indian culture a flavor-of-the-month status for a short time in 2008-2009. In the context of this rising profile of India, should there not be a greater role for Indian texts and materials in Japanese university English classes?

This article will address this question by way of introducing a literature and culture course I designed and taught at a Japanese university. The course was based on the Indian novel "Slumdog Millionaire" written by Vikas Swarup (2005). This course aimed to use the original text, a variety of authentic materials, and creative teaching methods to increase English language skills and student awareness of Indian and global issues.

I hope teachers may use some of the ideas in this article to teach other authentic texts or other cultures of their own choosing. Some teachers may wish to teach excerpts from the novel "Slumdog Millionaire" in conjunction with the movie or the graded reader. In any case, I hope this article will inspire teachers to teach Indian novels in the language classroom, and not to put Indian writing into the "too hard" or "too obscure" baskets.

The Novel

I have been arrested. For winning a quiz show. They came for me late last night, when even the stray dogs had gone off to sleep.

("Slumdog Millionaire" 2008.   p 1-2)

For those readers who don't know the story, *Slumdog Millionaire* is the tale of a penniless Mumbai waiter called Ram Mohammed Thomas, who wins India's biggest ever jackpot on a "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?" -style TV quiz show. The story of Ram's life is told as a series of often gut-wrenching episodes, each linked to a different quiz question from the TV show.

The novel was written by diplomat Vikas Swarup and published in 2005 (originally titled "Q&A"). Although it was Swarup's first novel, it was reviewed favorably. For example, according to a UK book review in *The Times*: "Mingling broad humor with incisive social comment, this is an absorbing and entertaining read." (2008)

The novel *Slumdog Millionaire* may be new and entertaining, but how did I come to choose it for a Japanese university course? In what ways is it a good choice for language learners?

In my case, I was required to choose an English literary text or texts for a 15-week English reading and lecture content course at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. At first I considered *Slumdog Millionaire*, but worried that the book was too long, and that Indian culture was too remote to interest the typical 19 or 20-year old Japanese student. Yet eventually I began to believe that this was the book that would most appeal to my students. It is a fresh and contemporary novel with an inspiring perspective. Its movie adaptation was hot from Academy Awards successes. I just had a feeling that this novel, with its Indian-accented English, would be an inspiration. Looking back, I realize that I had little idea of what I had let myself (and my students) in for.

Big Challenges and Three Solutions

For me as a language teacher, no doubt the biggest challenge of teaching *Slumdog Millionaire* was the sheer scale of time and energy that was required to prepare the course.

Slumdog Millionaire is 318 pages long. For nearly each of these pages, I had to carefully check, research and prepare before teaching. Some examples, from page 1 of the novel: What exactly is a *tamarind*

tree? Why are the police cars in Mumbai black jeeps? And so on.

Once I understood the text, the next step was to design a 15-week course that would be as comprehensible and motivating as possible for the students. In the process of doing this, I also ended up producing a 65-page *Slumdog Millionaire* workbook, which contained a variety of language and culture resources and activities.

Finally in the classroom, I realized that the teacher has to have energy and show genuine interest in India and in the story. It's a hard sell to convey the meaning and the value of the novel to some students. Passion is required.

In aiming to make my *Slumdog* classes a success, I based my course on 3 basic strategies:

1. scaffolding (to make the text more comprehensible and accessible to the students)
2. authenticity (bringing India into the classroom as much as possible)
3. involvement (where students are, in class, not passive but active and interactive)

Indian English, Vocabulary and Scaffolding

Studying a complete novel in any foreign language is very hard for language learners. In the case of "Slumdog Millionaire", the reading is particularly challenging. It would be fair to say that the amount of new vocabulary alone in the novel is huge. This is because, on top of the normal frequency of new vocabulary encountered in any foreign language novel, "Slumdog Millionaire" is peppered with uniquely Indian vernacular and Indian references. Unfamiliar Indian words include locations (*Dharavi, Juhu Vile Parle*), foods (*kachoris, bhature*), clothes (*choli, lungis*), as well as unfamiliar character names (for example, *Amitabh Bachchan* and *Gudiya*). Then there are actual Indian words and expressions laced into the text. "Khallas. Finished", I say, speaking curtly. "No more whiskey for today" (p.130). For some students, these extra vocabulary or foreign cultural words can lead to comprehension overload and meltdown.

I soon realized that a primary focus of my course would be to prevent such a meltdown. To make the text more easy and accessible, I used a wide variety of scaffolding techniques. The most prosaic of these were the chapter-by-chapter vocabulary lists. In these, I chose words from the text that seemed unlikely to be found in standard Japanese dictionaries (especially India references and slang expressions). Further vocabulary and Indian cultural background was pre-taught and revised in interactive activities like definition matching, eliciting (via blank fills), "find

the word" games, Indian clothes and food quizzes, and student-taught vocab sessions. More vocabulary and India information was elicited and revised through You Tube videos, documentaries, maps, and, of course, the "Slumdog Millionaire" DVD.

Another scaffolding strategy I employed was to study excerpts from a graded reader version of the novel. I used the intermediate level EFL reader "Slumdog Millionaire" (Macmillan) alongside pages from the original text. Doing this gave students more confidence and enjoyment. The graded reader confirmed to students that they had understood correctly. Students were encouraged to notice the difference between the two texts. Some students, I am happy to report, even expressed a preference for the original, authentic version.

Bringing India into the Classroom

In my *Slumdog Millionaire* class, I attempted to bring India into the classroom as much as possible through authentic materials. Short of burning incense (which would have set off the smoke alarms), I introduced as wide a range as possible of Indian materials related to the text.

The students saw Bollywood cinema, read Indian news articles, saw slides of objects in the text, and listened to Indian music. They watched "Who wants to be a Millionaire?" in Hindi and a UK Channel 4 documentary on Dharavi (where the novel is set). They compared real newspaper reviews of the novel, and also saw interviews with the author both in print and on You Tube.

By far the most exciting "authenticity" in our classroom, however, was a visit by the author of "Slumdog Millionaire", Vikas Swarup himself. Mr. Swarup kindly accepted my invitation, and came to give a lecture at Ritsumeikan University about 2 weeks before our final class. He talked to us (and about 100 other students and lecturers) about his novel and the process of writing it, as well as its Indian background. Following this, he commented on the economic and cultural relationship between Japan and India. He also answered questions from the audience. Finally, our students lined up to receive the author's autograph in their book. It was an extremely exciting and inspiring event. In the following weeks, my video of Swarup's lecture became another authentic material, as we replayed, analysed and discussed his comments in detail.

Student involvement

In the design of my *Slumdog Millionaire* course, I decided that if I was to hold the interest and motivation of the students through such a long and dense reading, I would have to double their involvement, and double their opportunities to experience the relevance of the text to their own lives. I wanted them to not just understand the text, but to be able to communicate with others about the characters, story, theme, and style.

To this end, I designed the course so that students would more *actively* interact with the course materials, and with each other. In class, they were expected to express or question their understanding and opinions of the text with others. All reading was to be done at home, as homework, before each session (one 25-page chapter per week). In class, students participated in interactive information exchanges and discussions. They wrote reviews and summaries, created quizzes, games, dramatic enactments and presentations.

Students were encouraged to evaluate the text from a subjective point of view, and to express their opinions to others. I asked them to discuss it in terms of reading enjoyment. *What was good, or boring? What was the most interesting part? Why?*

Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching *Slumdog Millionaire* was personally very satisfying, even though it was hard work. I can truly recommend using it in the foreign language classroom. Depending on the level of the class, and on the teacher's ability to bring the world of the text to the world of the student, the rewards can be inspiring.

Perhaps now is the right time to start teaching more about India. In the words of Aravind Adiga:

…in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erst-while master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, cell-phone usage and drug abuse, I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore. By telling you my life's story. ("The White Tiger" 2008. p 3-4)

But this is another story, for another university course.

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Resources and Further Reading

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Resources for Teaching about India

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- Kamdar, M. (2007) *Planet India*. Scribner.
- Singh, S. (2009) *India Guide*. Lonely Planet.

Books for Teaching
- Chatterjee, M. (2002) *India: Eyewitness Books*.
- Humble, D. (2007) *India in the World*. Watts.
- Shores, L. (2007) *Teens in India*. Compass.

DVD
- *Families of India*   <www.afk.com>

Poster   <www.socialstudies.com>
- *India and Her Neighbors*

Websites
- India for Kids
- India   <www.wikipedia.org>

FAST FACTS ON INDIA
- 1.2 billion people (world's largest democracy)
- Religion: Hindu 80% Muslim 13% Christian 2%
- 22 official languages, 350 million speak English
- 600 million people are under the age of 25
- 800 million people survive on less than $2 a day