

Teaching *Haiku* Composition to English Language Learners through *Honka-dori*

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Abstract

Honka-dori is the practice of a poet borrowing the language and/or imagery of earlier well-known poems, and using it to compose contemporary, original poems of their own. *Honka-dori* has been a well-documented practice of Japanese poets from the very earliest stages of Japan's poetic tradition. This paper describes a modern adaption of the practice of *honka-dori* as a creative writing exercise and its application to teaching creative writing to English language learners. The creative writing exercise is referred to as "One Line Provided" and is meant to help students write original poetry on their own. The students whom this paper describes were university level English language learners who performed this exercise as part of a content-based English class on *haiku* and *haiku* composition.

Educators have extolled the benefits of creative writing in the classroom for decades, noting the benefit it has on students' overall individual learning experience, regardless of the discipline being taught. In recent years, foreign language education programs and applied linguistics programs in particular have been (re-) examining the effects of creative writing activities with respect to L2 learning. Such programs and research claim that creative-writing aids L2 learners find their own voice, helps them gain autonomy as language learners, and motivates them to become more active in producing language. It is with these outcomes in mind that I designed this activity and presented it to students in a university seminar course titled "Journey to the Interior." Throughout the semester, students read an English translation of the master *haiku*-poet Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi*, which is a pre-modern Japanese prose travel-writing text interspersed with *haiku*. Students then performed a series of poetry writing exercises using language and imagery from the text to compose their own original poems. The following is a description of a writing exercise called "One-line Provided" that the students performed, followed by examples of students' original writing resulting from this exercise, and commentary on the perceived benefits and hindrances to students' English language learning.

Keywords: creative writing, *haiku*, CLIL, poetry composition

In keeping with a current popular trend of using creative writing in foreign language classes, I began teaching *haiku* composition to Akita University students.¹ The class in which I introduced this writing activity was a seminar class (*zemi* ゼミ) called "Journey to the Interior." I designed this course as an intensive study of Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi*.² Bashō (1644-1694) is considered to be a master *haiku* poet. In 1689 he departed Edo on foot and

¹ There are many interpretations of what constitutes an English language *haiku*. For the sake of this paper, *haiku* means a fifteen syllable poem containing a seasonal word (*kigo* 季語). This is also the working definition that I presented to the students in the course described in this paper.

² The Japanese-English bilingual edition of *Oku no hosomichi* which we used for the class was *The Narrow Road to Oku* (Keene, 1996).

traveled throughout much of northern Honshū. He recorded his experiences as well as the *haiku* that he composed along the way in what was later to become the book *Oku no hosomichi*. In order to give the students in the class a more hands-on, experiential classroom experience while approaching the material, I dedicated a large portion of the total class time to teaching *haiku* composition. Since the students had had little to no prior experience with writing *haiku* (particularly in English) I designed a series of writing prompts for them to perform—similar to those that may be performed at a poetry writer’s workshop. One of these prompts is what I call the “One Line Provided” exercise. For this exercise, I would provide students with a line from a famous *haiku*, which they would then use to write their own *haiku*. To many from western traditions, this may sound like simple copying, or more harshly: plagiarism. However, this tradition of borrowing lines from earlier, well revered poems in order to compose one’s own poem is a classic Japanese poetic tradition, with its roots in Chinese poetic tradition. In Japanese, this practice is called *honka-dori*. Using this One Line Provided writing prompt to compose *haiku* in English is therefore a modern iteration of a centuries-old tradition.

The seminar was open to all first year students. All first and second year Akita University students must complete three sequential semesters of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Since the EAP classes are designed to be a part of the university’s core curriculum, writing activities included in the course are limited to formal-writing skill development. The EAP program’s syllabus does not include any creative writing activities, nor to my knowledge do any other courses offered at the university. Therefore the seminar class that I offered (and that will be explained in more detail below) provided students with the unique opportunity to apply their English language ability to creative writing endeavors, rather than traditional formal writing activities.

Strictly speaking creative writing is not limited to what one may think of as “literary writing,” but instead is a broad term that encompasses a variety of writing based tasks and a variety of desired outcomes. Creative writing tasks have been a feature of progressive education programs for decades. Research investigating the effects of creative writing in connection to learning continues to yield new methods of applying the practice in various education settings, as well as present the newly found ways in which it benefits students. Although creative writing activities may sound as though they belong only in language arts or writing-specific classes, they function is beneficial across all disciplines. The value of creative writing across disciplines is asserted by Gardner (1983) and Armstrong (1994), who both praise the use of creative writing as a regular class activity that can and should be performed in all classes, regardless of subject content, for the benefit of students’ overall individual learning experience. In recent years, foreign language education programs and applied linguistics researchers have been (re-) examining the effects of creative writing activities with respect to L2 learning environments, autonomy, and motivation (Abrams, 2010; and Zhao, 2011). Such researchers’ credit creative-writing with allowing L2 learners to find their own voice, display their own autonomy as learners, and become more active in producing language rather than simply regurgitating learned expressions and phrases.

1.1 *Honka-dori*: a Poetic Device

Japanese poets have been practicing *honka-dori* for as long as there has been a poetic tradition in Japan. Translated in Brower and Miner (1988) as “allusive variation,” *honka-dori* essentially means the practice by which a poet borrows language and images of earlier poetry when composing their own poem.³ Although this practice has its roots in Chinese poetry traditions, the earliest examples of this practice in Japanese poetry appear in the *Manyōshū*, which dates to the late 8th century and is the oldest extant anthology of Japanese poetry. The *Manyōshū* consists of a variety of poetic forms written by hundreds of poets, who composed them during the mid-seventh to mid-eighth centuries.

³ For the Japanese definition, see Nihon daijiten kankō-kai 日本大辞典刊行会 (Eds.). (1975). *Nihon kokugo daijiten* 日本国語大辞典, vol. 18. Tokyo: Shogakukan.

Manyōshū poets conspicuously borrowed whole lines of poems from other poets who also appear in the anthology.⁴ Although this practice may sound like plagiarism, it was performed by one poet in admiration and respect for another. According to Keene (1999),

Manyōshū poets did not believe that a poem belonged exclusively to its creator. They seemed to think instead that poems on the same subject and even using the same language as existing poems represented attempts by successive generations of poets to touch the core of sentiments expressed.

Honka-dori would continue to be practiced by famous Japanese poets and prose writers throughout the ages and to varying degrees. Whole lines of prose would be borrowed from such classics as *Kokinshū*, *Shin-Kokinshū*, *Ise monogatari*, *Genji monogatari*, and many more. Japanese poets would even borrow lines of famous verse transnationally, as in the case of Yoshishige no Yasutane borrowing lines from the Chinese poet Po Chū-i when writing his *Record of the Pond Pavilion*.

It is with this idea of *honka-dori* in mind that I created the writing exercise called “One-line Provided.” For this exercise, I create handouts with one line from a *haiku*, distribute them to my students, and instructed them to compose a new *haiku* using the line. Writing poetry can be a daunting task for any student, let alone students studying English as a foreign language, so I thought that this task would be a gentle way to ease students into writing whole original *haiku* on their own, while learning about and appreciating exemplar Japanese *haiku*.

2. A Shift from Formal Writing to Creative Writing

Progressive educators in the West have long advocated for the use of creative writing in the classroom, even in non-literary or language arts classes. Progressive educators in the 1970s and 1980s encouraged the use of both creative writing and writing exercises in general to address students’ individual learning styles. Some examples of this are found in the pedagogical theory advanced by education psychologists Howard Gardner (1983) and Thomas Armstrong (1994) and its subsequent application in classrooms all throughout America. Applying Gardner’s research on individuals’ multi-faceted learning styles, Armstrong provides detailed examples of how creative writing can be applied across all academic disciplines (including some not so obvious ones such as mathematics and physical education) in order to promote students’ engagement in the material. More importantly Armstrong provides detailed examples of how learners can benefit when creative writing becomes a regular class fixture.

Proponents of educational trends that encourage critical thinking (as opposed to rote learning) and “active-learning” also extol the benefits of creative writing. Educational researchers like McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith (1986) assert the benefits of creative writing to bolster critical thinking skills by using writing prompts in role-playing activities. Bonwel & Eison (1991), advocates of “active learning,” promote writing activities as one of the seven major characteristics of an active learning environment. While some of the writing activities promoted by these education researchers may fall outside a strict definition of creative writing, one may see that each of these educational trends emphasizes the importance of writing activities and their role in progressive education.

Within the realm of foreign language learning, the need to be able to write in both formal and informal modes has long been an essential practice to acquiring a foreign language, but in recent years foreign language education researchers have been more closely considering the effects of creative writing in the L2. Creative writing in L2 has been the focus of foreign language education research and practice at the University of Texas at Austin’s Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL). Zsuzsanna Abrams, one of the researchers in this

⁴ For a more detailed example, see Keene (1999), 121.

consortium, writes that for students studying a foreign language “creative writing allows students to experiment and play with the language, and thus, to take ownership of the language” (Abrams, 2010). The center has devised a series of lessons for L2 writing and outlines how writing may be incorporated into an L2 curriculum.

One more current study on creative writing is a recent doctoral thesis from the University of Warwick. In the dissertation, Zhao (2011) specifically addresses creative writing in L2. Much like other earlier educational trends, Zhao’s study presents creative writing as an auxiliary learning activity meant to complement SLA. Zhao’s research shows how SLA learners can make use of creative writing as a means to better establish themselves within a given social context in which the L2 is necessary.

The aforementioned research and pedagogical trends is in no way an exhaustive list of educational trends and practices that include creative writing. Writing activities in general have long been a staple of western education, so these few examples are meant to show how as progressive education trends (as opposed to traditional, teacher-centered educational methods) developed, so too did educators re-considered the ways in which writing exercises, especially creative writing exercises, could benefit a wide variety of learners. Similarly as educators within the fields of secondary language acquisition and foreign language learning have become more progressive, they too have begun employing creative writing exercises in their classrooms.

3. Method

As mentioned above, the students to whom I introduced this writing prompt were enrolled in a seminar class titled “Journey to the Interior.” The class was held once a week for a total of fifteen meetings. While the main objective of the course was to study Bashō’s *Oku no hosomichi* in depth, creative writing (i.e. *haiku* composition in English) was also a major component. In order to introduce my students to English *haiku* composition, I designed a number of writing prompts and exercises that would prepare gradually to compose their own poems. The exercise explained in this article, “One Line Provided,” was the seventh exercise that I presented to the class. Grafström (2016) describes a few of the other creative writing exercises that students performed prior to this one.

These exercises were done during approximately the first 20 minutes of each class, meaning that over the course of the semester approximately 18% of the total class time was dedicated to creative writing exercises. Incorporating these exercises into each class gave the course the feel of a “writer’s workshop” in that after students performed that day’s respective exercise there was time for students to share what they had written with their classmates. This was followed by a brief discussion, and peer feedback. Performing these exercises culminated in a series of three class-wide *haiku* contests (*kukai* 句会) held during the 5th, 10th, and 15th classes. Ideally, the One Line Provided exercise as well as the other *haiku* writing exercises would have enabled each student to compose an original *haiku* which could be submitted for the contest. At the end of the semester, each student also had to submit an original *haiku* to the Japan-Russia *Haiku* Contest sponsored by the Akita International Haiku Network.

3.1 Participants

As per Akita University course guidelines, participants in the seminar were limited to twenty students. The class is open to all students, regardless of major, English language ability, or native language. Although the writing examples described below were written by native Japanese speakers, participants in the past have come from Romania, China, Vietnam, and Korea. No formal metric was used to gauge students’ English language ability, however all students seemed to be intermediate to high. As for academic background, participants have had majors such as international studies, pre-med, and engineering.

Regarding class size, since both peer- and teacher- feedback are important steps in the One Line Provided exercise smaller class sizes are preferable.

3.2 Materials

The materials I used for this *honka-dori* inspired writing exercise consisted of handouts prepared by me and distributed to the students in class. First I selected five random *haiku* composed by well-known poets. Using *haiku* written Bashō from Keene's *The Narrow Road to Oku* would have sufficed for this step, but instead I referred to another text, *1020 Haiku in Translation: The Heart of Basho, Buson, and Issa* (Saito, 2006). The purpose of this was to introduce the students to more of Bashō's *haiku* as well as to other Edo period *haiku* masters who were influenced by Bashō, namely Yosa no Buson 与謝蕪村 (1716-1784) and Kobayashi Issa 小林一茶 (1763-1828).

The five random *haiku* I selected during this particular semester were all written by Bashō and followed a summer theme. Since the course was held during the first semester, reading and working with Bashō's summer themed *haiku* reinforced images and themes that the students were experiencing real-time. Table 1 lists the *haiku* from which I borrowed lines for this exercise.

Table 1 Haiku used for One Line Provided Exercise⁵			
Number	Haiku	Line Borrowed	Number of Syllables
1	The clear Kiyotaki River— Into its waves scatter Green pine needles. ⁶	The clear Omono River ⁷	7
2	In the early summer rain The floating nests of grebes I'd like to go and see.	In the early summer rain	7
3	A little cuckoo In the direction it disappears— A single island.	A little cuckoo	5
4	"Across the fields guide the horse"— A little cuckoo's call.	Across the fields	4
5	As the days go by Barley blushes— A singing skylark.	As the days go by	5

⁵ For the Japanese and *romaji* versions, see Saito (2006), 73-74.

⁶ Here I'll note that the translated *haiku* in Table 1 are not preserved in the seventeen syllable pattern. Each of these poems in its original Japanese form does follow the 5-7-5 syllable pattern, but translators are often at odds as to which translation methods are appropriate. Usually, this comes down merely to a matter of opinion. Although I do not agree with Saito and Nelson's translation method, their collection of *haiku* in translation is a nice resource.

⁷ I replaced "Kiyotaki River" (a river in Kyoto) with "Omono River" the major local river in Akita since students were more likely to be more familiar with it. The "Omono River" is one syllable short of "Kiyotaki River," a difference not critical for the purpose of the exercise.

To prepare the handouts, I typed the borrowed *haiku* lines onto strips of paper with space for students to write their name, and with more than enough extra space to write down some ideas before writing their final *haiku*. I also indicated the syllable count for each line, typing it in parenthesis and superscript at the end of the line. I prepared four strips for each line (for a total of twenty strips) so that when I distributed them to the class students would likely not have the same line as the student next to them, and also to create results with more variety.

3.3 One Line Provided Procedure

After distributing the handouts, I allot five to ten minutes for students to complete the exercise. This may sound like a brief amount of time, but by the time I introduced this *honka-dori* inspired writing exercise, the students have already participated in a number of other *haiku* writing exercises, making them accustomed to writing. During the exercise, I allow students to use electronic dictionaries, dictionaries on their smart phones, or paper dictionaries if they wish to do so, but instructed them to please not search for the line on the internet using their smartphones. While the students perform the exercise, I walk around the class, making minor corrections to grammar (for example, preposition choice) or to spelling, but am careful not to give too much guidance and interfere with the students' final product.

When the time allotted for composing a *haiku* is finished, I select some students to write their finished *haiku* (or what they have completed) on the board. Students with the same lines can then compare what they have written with what appears on the board. At this time I offer more detailed comments on grammar and vocabulary usage, both in the form of correcting errors and in praising students' performances.

Finally, I reveal the original *haiku*-in-translation from which I borrowed the lines so that students can compare their *haiku* to the original. To date I have only used Japanese *haiku* in translation, so I supply the students with both the original Japanese version as well as a professional English translation. This helps the students further understand English language usage in writing *haiku* since most of the translations could be considered poetry in their own right.

4. Results and Discussion

The majority of students completed the exercise in the 5-10 minutes provided. Table 2 presents some examples of *haiku* written by students wrote using the line "a little cuckoo" (*haiku* 3 from Table 1).

Table 2 <i>Haiku composed by students based on the line "a little cuckoo"</i>		
	<i>Haiku</i>	<i>Syllable count</i>
Student A	A little cuckoo Can you imagine slyness from cute appearance?	17
Student B	A little cuckoo Chirping loudly in his nest Not knowing his mom	17
Student C	A little cuckoo Please tell me spring is coming As soon as possible!	17

4.1 Commentary

One thing that I noticed though, as I circulated around the room while the students were doing the exercise, is that many students were writing in Japanese first, and then trying to translate what they had written into English. This indicates that many of them were still thinking in Japanese. In order to improve one's fluency in writing, then they really should write directly into the target language. After observing this practice, I made the comment to the students.

Students who received the line “a little cuckoo” easily understood the words “a” and “little,” these are basic English words. However I observed that many of them had to check the meaning of “cuckoo” (*hototogisu* ホトトギス). It is a common word in Japanese, but one that students may or may not have come across in middle school or high school English classes. Therefore, students tended to first check the meaning of “cuckoo” before they could form a poem. This is important because one of the rules of *haiku* is that it must include a seasonal word (*kigo* 季語). Various schools of *haiku* have been formed over the centuries, but since Bashō used seasonal words in his *haiku* (with rare exceptions) I too enforced this rule in the class. “Cuckoo” is the seasonal word in the poem from which this line was borrowed, signifying summer. Thus I realized that students really needed to understand not only the basic grammar necessary to compose a *haiku* from the lines I gave them, but also have a good understanding of words related to the environment and nature.

Upon reading the poems in Chart 2, clearly there are some discrepancies with standard English grammar. For example, perhaps a more grammatically correct version of Student A's *haiku* would be:

A little cuckoo / Can you imagine **its** slyness from **its** cute appearance?

The possessive pronoun “its” is a rather basic English grammar point. Therefore a question one might pose is whether or not the student purposefully neglected to add it in an effort to sustain the 17-syllable limit? I did not inquire into this, but regardless one may say that the student's *haiku* successfully created an image of a cuckoo that was sly and cute. In that case, communicating the image of the cuckoo seems to have taken priority over correct grammar.

For all intents and purposes, Student B's *haiku* is rather grammatically correct. Regarding syntax, adverb placement tends to be rather tricky for students, since adverbs can be rather fluid in a sentence. But Student B, places “loudly” right after “chirping,” which, many readers would agree, is pleasing to the ear. Of course other variations that would be just as acceptable are “**Loudly** chirping in his nest,” or “Chirping in his nest **loudly**.”

The syllable count for each line in Student C's *haiku* is 5-6-6. Even Japanese *haiku* written by masters sometimes have an extra syllable or are one syllable short, so this syllable distribution is really not problematic for successfully composing *haiku*. However the verb “coming” appears to be in the progressive form. If this is the case then it should be written as “is coming.” Like Student A, Student C may have excluded it on purpose to preserve the seventeen-syllable total. Again, I did not inquire further into this. A more grammatically correct way of writing the second line would be, “Please tell me spring is coming.”

Student C's poem is already a really good attempt at writing a *haiku* in my opinion, however if the student used a contraction, the *haiku* would have been grammatically correct and within the stipulated seventeen-syllables. In that case it would have been written as “A little cuckoo / Please tell me spring's coming as soon as possible!”

4.2 Discussion

Understanding environment / nature words

Limit lines that only have *kigo*
 these haiku show ownership/autonomy in the target lang
 other types of poetic forms could work too??

One of the domains of the Multiple Intelligence Theory is Linguistic Intelligence (Gardner, 1983), which is defined in Armstrong (1994) as the ability to use words effectively whether orally or in writing. “Effectiveness” can be thought of as being a spectrum. Student A’s *haiku* has awkward phrasing. However it effectively conjures the image of a small cuckoo that is cute, but sly.

Student C’s *haiku* is also a bit awkward since the verb form was not written precisely. However, the use of the word “please” and the exclamation mark as punctuation do indeed effectively convey a sense of urgency or eagerness—perhaps maybe that the poet is tired of winter, or that something is occurring in the upcoming spring that the poet is anticipating.

Not knowing for certain whether Student C is referring to the past (the winter) or the future (anticipating something in spring) is an example of the mystery (*yūgen* 幽玄) that excellent *haiku* are supposed to contain. That is to say, a *haiku* is not meant to be too clear and direct. On the other hand, when students learn basic paragraph writing, they learn to be as direct and clear as possible. With this in mind, Student C’s *haiku* is not only a display of effective English usage, but could also be considered a fine *haiku*.

Of these three examples, Student B’s *haiku* is perhaps the most grammatically correct. Also, a clear image comes to mind upon reading the *haiku*: a cuckoo chirping loudly, maybe after just hatching, or maybe because its mother has left for some reason. Student B’s poem also uses English effectively, and the mystery as to why the cuckoo does not know its mother adds to its being a quality *haiku*.

If a poem’s effectiveness is measured by grammar usage alone, then Student C’s *haiku* is perhaps the most effective of these three. The most revered poets often bend grammar rules in favor of conjuring the image that they desire. Therefore, grammar aside, not just Student C, but each of these students effectively (or perhaps inadvertently) used English to express their desired message poetically. These results indicate that the “One-line Provided” writing exercise is a suitable activity appealing to the Linguistic Intelligence domain.

5. Conclusion

Using *honka-dori* inspired writing exercises such as this One Line Provided one could benefit students in a variety of ways. Providing students with a line borrowed from a famous *haiku* or other type of poem can serve as a good basis from which to write their own poem. As researchers and language educators at the University of Texas and the University of Warwick have shown, non-tradition writing activities like creative writing and specifically poetry provide students with a sense of ownership of the target language—a sense of ownership that allows them to more fully interact in social settings in which the target language is the main language. *Honka-dori* exercises may enable students to achieve this.

Also, *haiku* composition and *honka-dori* style exercises could be a good way of teaching English vocabulary related to the environment and nature. A characteristic of *haiku* is that they contain seasonal words (*kigo*). By providing students with borrowed lines that contain seasonal words from which to compose their poems, they may be able to build their vocabulary connected to nature and the environment. Not only would this benefit students in social settings (hiking, travelling in nature, etc.) but could also benefit students in scientific fields.

One “test” that I did subject my students to was an international *haiku* contest. The 4th & 5th Japan-Russia Haiku Contest took place in 2015 & 2016, respectively. In 2015, out of over one hundred *haiku* submitted by students from approximately 59 countries, two students from my class won an honorable mention, meaning that their *haiku* were among the top 10 entries. In 2016, out of 155 *haiku* submitted by students from approximately 51 countries, five students from my class won an honorable mention, and were among the top 20 entries. It would be interesting to know what writing exercises, if any, the winning poet did to become a writer, but that information is not divulged.

In closing, whether or not this “One-line Provided” creative-writing exercise can produce any measurable, positive outcomes in a student’s English language ability remains to be seen. However, students who performed this exercise displayed ownership of the language and effectively communicated their own ideas through *haiku*—as is evident in the poems displayed in Chart 2 as well as in the fact that participants in this class have been honorably-mentioned in the international *haiku* contest.

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