

## Teaching *Haiku* and *Haiku* Composition to English Language Learners

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### Abstract

Since spring 2014 I have been teaching an English-language intensive course titled “Journey to the Interior.” The theme of the course is the *haiku* poet Matsuo Bashō’s *Oku no hosomichi*. The course is an English-intensive, content based *zemi* designed for highly motivated first year students, regardless of faculty or major. Coming from the point of view that the spirit of active learning in the class room is fundamental to learning, I developed a series of poetry writing warm-up activities as well as a series of *haiku* contests throughout the semester. These activities serve not only to challenge students’ English abilities, but also to bring them closer to the text: by writing *haiku* they are sharing in Bashō’s experience as a poet and by taking part in *haiku* contests they are sharing the experience of ordinary Japanese poetry enthusiasts from the era in which Bashō lived.

This paper will provide a brief outline of the course’s content, followed by descriptions of two creative writing exercises performed by the students, and finally a description of the *haiku* contests held in the class. Along with this, I will also introduce a casual explanation of active learning as an educational theory in order to establish that this course is indeed an active-learning course both in design and in practice. The following article is a descriptive account, rather than an empirical investigation of the influence of an active learning approach on English language acquisition.

**Keywords:** active learning, creative writing in L2, *haiku*, literature in language learning,  
Matsuo Bashō

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Aside from the mandatory courses that undergraduate students are required to complete for graduation, Akita University also offers a variety of classes called “*zemi*.”<sup>2</sup> *Zemi* (short for *zeminaru* ゼミナール—a loan word from German) are not required to complete any one particular major. Since full time faculty members are more or less free to design their own *zemi* syllabus based on their research interests and/or past teaching experience, *zemi* themes vary widely. Therefore the university’s goal in offering these classes is to expose students to a wide variety of material that is not necessarily connected with their intended major with the hopes of broadening their minds.

Although I am responsible for first and second year English language classes, commonly referred to as English for Academic Purposes (or, “EAP” for short), my background is not in English language education, but rather in Japanese literary studies. Thus, I seized the opportunity to create a Japanese literature *zemi* based on Matsuo Bashō’s *Oku no hosomichi*.<sup>3</sup> Not only does this theme fit with my research interest, but in 2009 after finishing my master’s degree, I retraced Bashō’s steps on the *Oku no hosomichi*, writing *haiku* and studying about the author’s life and times along the way. This experience profoundly affected my understanding of the book’s content and of the author’s life, which put me in a unique position at Akita University to teach the course in an interesting and meaningful way. What’s more, much of Bashō’s journey was through modern day Tohoku. Since Akita University is situated in Tohoku and many of its students come from towns that Bashō passed through, I thought that this *zemi* would be especially meaningful.

Keeping the above background information in mind this paper attempts, first, to define active learning by drawing on a variety of articles across academic disciplines. I will then describe how educators may apply active learning approach to university level classes and to creative writing classes. Next, this paper describes how I have applied an active learning approach to my *zemi*, “Journey to the Interior,” by means of poetry warm-ups at the beginning of class and by incorporating a series of *haiku* contests into the course schedule. Finally, this paper offers some reflection on the course and identifies some potential problems this or similar courses could encounter.

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<sup>2</sup> During academic year 2015-16, Akita offered approximately 36 *zemi* during both the spring and fall semesters.

<sup>3</sup> *Oku no hosomichi* is translated into English a variety of ways depending on the translator. For example it sometimes appears as “the narrow road to Oku” or “the narrow road to the deep north” however I have decided to use “journey to the interior.”

### **Active Learning: What It Is**

When one hears the term “active learning,” the term usually comes across as redundant. One may think, “Isn’t all learning *active*?” The root of education in the west is modeled on that of ancient Greece. It is based on a shared set of ideals, so “ideally,” all learning is “active.” However the fact of the matter is that many teachers revert to lecture style, teacher-focused classes where students assume a passive role all too often. Reasons for this vary a great deal—some the fault of the educator, some the fault of the schools that put too much administrative burden on the educator. These are just two possible factors.

For the past few decades, active learning as an educational approach has fallen in and out of vogue at all levels of education from elementary school to universities and across all educational disciplines. Therefore, definitions of active learning are more open than restrictive. All definitions of active learning appear to share the essential notion that “active learning” is not a learning approach, as the name suggests, but rather is descriptive of the educator’s approach to delivering the course content to students. Therefore, an active approach to learning in the classroom is one in which students do more than just listen “actively” to teachers’ lectures. They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems (Bonwell, 1991) during the class. Classes in which students are simply in their seats listening to a lecture and (ideally) writing notes are not classes in which active learning is taking place. This can be somewhat offensive to teachers who are really animated during lectures and are overly excited about the topic, because they mistakenly equate their excitement and diligent lecture planning with students’ attitudes about listening to the teacher’s knowledge being conveyed.

If one were to search, one would find that there is no shortage of active-learning teaching-resources on the internet. Many of these available resources such as Bonwell & Eison (1991), O’Neil & Pinder-Grover (n.d.), Paulson & Faust (n.d.) also list suggested classroom tasks that have been shown to nurture active learning successfully.

Some tasks pair well with lectures such as the One Minute Paper and Clarification Pauses as described by Paulson & Faust. Both tasks include a short pause in a teacher’s lecture during which students are told to either write briefly what they understood from the lecture thus far (as in the case of the “One Minute Paper”) or to speak with the student sitting beside them in order to confirm what they understood from the lecture up to that point.

Other tasks suggested by active learning proponents encourage a more decisive shift from lecturing. Bonwell & Eison suggest a number of student-centered discussion tasks that range from pairs, to small groups, to whole class.

Yet another series of tasks aids students to come to their own conclusions and make their own discoveries by incorporating teacher-guided activities. O'Neil & Pinder-Grover suggest tasks such as Brainstorming, Role Playing, and Experiential Learning.

In summary, active learning describes the educator's approach to 1) engaging students during class with tasks other than the lecture/note taking binary, 2) provoking students' interaction with one another while contemplating lesson material, and 3) designing classroom procedures and tasks that inspire students to rely on discovering their own outcomes to the course material rather than simply receiving the information by means of a lecture.

### **Active Learning Applied to Creative Writing**

Students' writing serves as a good platform from which to plan and perform active-learning tasks. Writing samples can include short essays, synopses of lectures, reactions to assigned texts, and technical writing samples, to name but a few. Once all students have prepared their work, their writing samples can then be redistributed to their classmates at random or given to their designated partner. Students are then instructed to give critical feedback, assess [their classmate's] arguments, correct grammatical mistakes and so forth, which Paulson & Faust argue is a particularly effective way to improve student writing.

A portion of my *zemi* "Journey to the Interior" relies on traditional assessments and activities. For example, I still administer quizzes on assigned readings from the text, give lectures to cover pertinent information, and have the students give PowerPoint presentations on selected topics. It is difficult to quantify exactly how much, but a large portion of time is dedicated to creative writing. This includes classroom time (warm-up activities) as well as time outside the class (preparing for the *haiku* contests).<sup>4</sup>

### **Warm-up Activities that Nurture Active Learning**

Active learning is by nature a student-centered educational approach. However it is not enough for the teacher to utilize active-learning practices. As Danielson (2007) emphasizes, teachers must communicate clearly with their students. When teachers communicate with their students, the students understand what the teacher's expectations are. From an active learning perspective, these expectations are that the students assume an active role in class and are prepared to engage in the selected activities to the best of their ability.

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<sup>4</sup> Students are required to compose their original *haiku* for the *haiku* contests outside of class on their own time, and e-mail it to me a day before the contest.

Danielson also asserts the necessity for students to understand the classroom procedures clearly. One method that I have found to benefit my students' understanding of my expectations is to start each of my *zemi* classes with a warm-up activity. These warm-up activities shift the focus of the class from me as the lead role of the class, to the students. Since I consistently start each class with a warm-up, students know very well that when class begins, they must be ready to participate actively.

The warm-up activities that I have selected are meant to challenge the students' English abilities as well as prepare them to be creative writers. By and large the majority of English classes in Japan focus on technical or academic writing, so teaching modes of creative writing truly is a challenge to both the students and the teacher.

#### **J to E, E to J translation exercises.**

The warm-up exercises I schedule for the first four *zemi* classes involve translating selected *haiku*. In the first two classes, this means translating *haiku* from Japanese to English (J to E) and in the third and fourth classes it means translating from English to Japanese (E to J).

For the J to E translation activity, I provide the students with *haiku* (in Japanese) from Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi* that they must translate to English. Aside from introducing them to the book's material, this exercise serves to make them aware of some of the characteristics of the two languages that effect writing *haiku* in English. Some of these are characteristics are singular and plural forms of nouns, the use of articles, syllable count, punctuation, and other things that they will need to keep in mind when composing their own *haiku*. The E to J activity serves the same purpose. One thing that is necessary for the students to take notice of is that the English versions of Bashō's *haiku* that I select are all seventeen syllables. Even though their English translations may not be seventeen syllables, it is important for them to understand that seventeen syllable English *haiku* can convey a meaning very close to that of the original Japanese.

#### ***Haiku* scramble.**

Another exercise I use to start the class I refer to as simply "*haiku* scramble." For this exercise, I once again use *haiku* from *Oku no hosomichi*. I type the English versions of the *haiku* in Microsoft Word, then cut out each individual word. Students then form pairs and try to re-order the words to form the original poem. Again, aside from introducing and/or reinforcing the book's material, the students realize English language nuances like syntax, word order, and

the like.

### **Class *Haiku* Contests**

Three English *haiku* contests are spaced evenly throughout the semester. The warm-up activities are meant to be for learning and discovery, so they have no bearing on a student's grade, *per se*, but the *haiku* contests are 40% of a student's grade. The following is a description of how I manage the *haiku* contests.

Students e-mail me their English *haiku* one day before the day of the contest. I then copy and paste the *haiku* into two Word documents. One document has the poems with the author's names and is for me to record who has written what. The students do not see this until after the contest. The other document lists the *haiku*, which I order alphabetically for randomization, and number sequentially from one. Beside each *haiku* is a box in which to write a score.

Each student receives a copy of the numbered poems. I then instruct the class to read each *haiku* carefully and score them from 1 to 4, with 1 being the best. It is important to notice that the students are not ranking the poems, but rather scoring them. After the allotted time, we tally the scores for each *haiku* and the one with the lowest score wins. Students sit in rows, so I have found that the most efficient way to tally scores is to have students do it by row first, then I tally the totals from each row. It should be noted that I do not give the students a list of parameters by which to score the *haiku*. All I instruct them to do is to assign a score based on their feeling. My hope is that the students apply what they have learned in class about *haiku* and *haiku* composition (as well as their prior knowledge of the English language) to score the poems.

Once the winning poems have been decided, I ask the top three students to comment about their *haiku*. I ask them to tell the class information like why they wrote it, where, when, and any other information about the *haiku* that they would like to share. After that I ask students who scored those winning *haiku* with a "1" to share with the class what they liked about the *haiku*.

### **For the Future**

By the time of this publication, I have taught this *zemi* twice. I have changed aspects of this course rather considerably, but since these aspects are not necessarily related to active learning, I will not go into a description of them here. As for the creative writing warm-up exercises and *haiku* contest, there are perhaps two things that I plan to address when I teach this course again in the future: time management and making some sort of finished, tactile product to display the students' work.

Time management is an issue with which many teachers struggle. One observation that I have made upon reflecting on my teaching is that the time it takes to do the creative writing warm-up exercises takes longer than I plan which cuts into the other activities I have planned for that respective day. One of the reasons for this is that since I conduct the class in English to students of varying English ability, it sometimes takes longer to explain things or have the class understand my meaning. Usually after the first few classes I have a good understanding of students' abilities and can plan future lessons accordingly. Ultimately, the time needed to perform these warm-ups adequately depends on that particular year's students, so from year to year I have to continue adjusting times it takes to do in-class tasks.

I am fortunate in that the students who have enrolled in this class have all been very motivated. I have also observed that they have put a lot of effort into writing their *haiku*. Therefore in the future I would like to create some kind of *haiku* journal. Such a journal would include examples from both the creative writing warm-up exercises as well as from the *haiku* contests. One obstacle which all teachers will understand is, again, time. Akita University tends to conduct the bulk of classes in the spring semester, which makes this a very busy time for me. And, since this *zemi* is above and beyond what I am contracted to teach, it already consumes too much of the time I need for my other classes and professional responsibilities. Being able to hire a student to help create a journal would be good.

### **Potential Risks to Success**

Implementing classroom tasks and activities based on an active-learning approach to teaching may negative cause side effects. Both Bonwell and Prince laud active learning, but also identify some elements that could possibly hinder active learning from contributing to students' success. There are many class activities that fall under the active-learning umbrella, each with its own pro's and con's and potential risks to achieving successful learning. For the purposes of this paper however I will limit my examination to teachers, students, the curriculum and how each of those may hinder an active learning approach.

Surprisingly, studies by both educators seem to assert that teachers can be a hindrance to students' success. If teachers have received their schooling through traditional teacher-centered, lecture-based methods, then they may not be adequately prepared to incorporate active-learning tasks in the classroom and achieve successful outcomes. Upon glancing at suggested active learning tasks, one may have a notion that "anything goes" or "any outcome is a good outcome," but this is far from the truth. Just as with any other approach to teaching with which one may

not be familiar, being able to incorporate active learning tasks successfully requires training as well as peer and student feedback.

One very interesting observation made by Prince is in regards to students' perceptions about success. Prince suggests that students may be of the point of view that success comes from competition. Therefore, students may not readily see the benefits from things like pair-and/or group activities, peer feedback, and the like. Since active-learning requires collaboration at all levels, this type of cut-throat competitive spirit in students may not elicit the desired results.

One final risk to accomplishing successful active learning classes comes from within the curriculum. If a teacher finds themselves in a situation in which they are required to deliver too much course content in too little time, then some active-learning tasks may hinder their ability to do so.

In summary, educators must carefully consider their own, personal experience with the active-learning tasks that they hope to incorporate in their classrooms, clearly communicate to students the benefits of active-learning based approaches, and determine which active learning tasks are best suited to their curricular needs.

## Conclusion

### Addressing Risks to Successful Active Learning Activities and “Journey to the Interior”

Before concluding this paper, I will address each of the aforementioned risks to a successful active learning environment in terms of my class.

First is in regards to the teacher's presence in the classroom and attitude towards active learning outcomes. With creative writing, it is sometimes problematic defining what a successful product is. Also, since creative writing yields a wide range of outcomes in terms of what students produce, there is certainly the potential of adopting an attitude that is too laid back. Therefore teachers must plan in advance what is acceptable and what is not.

In the case of my *zemi*, I have managed to strike a fare balance. I demand that *haiku* writing assignments be handed in on time, however I am fairly lax when it comes to following *haiku*-writing rules and sometimes even on checking grammar and word choice. Class activities like peer reviewing *haiku* and the *haiku* contests are only successful if students prepare their *haiku* by the appointed time. If one student is not prepared, then it hinders others from participating fully in the day's activity. Similarly, missing class is also severely treated. On the other hand, I am lax with forcing students to adhere strictly to grammar rules or even proper



syntax within their *haiku*. Misspelling words however, is not acceptable. Setting ground rules like these and clearly communicating them to the students has an impact on the success of active learning tasks and will show that the teacher has not totally let go of the reins.

The second risk mentioned above is with regards to students' beliefs about achieving success through competition rather than teamwork and collaboration. As the teacher of a creative writing class, it is essential for me to have the students collaborate with each other, especially in terms of peer reviewing each other's work. If a student does not make an honest effort in evaluating a classmate's work, then the author of that work may not improve. Not only that, but my responsibilities would increase if I felt as though I needed to second guess each student's peer evaluation.

As mentioned in the introduction, I have taught this *zemi* twice, but this notion had never occurred to me. Coincidentally, the majority of the students who enrolled in this course, both years, have been medical school students. Medical school students in America have the reputation of being fiercely competitive amongst one another, however I do not know if this same reputation is true of Japanese medical school students. I will be teaching this class again during academic year 2016-17 and will be sure to make some attempt at evaluating students' competitiveness and/or willingness to collaborate with one another in order to succeed.

In closing, while language teachers may take it for granted that learning is by nature an "active" process, they should take the time to reflect regularly on their course as a whole and on individual classes to confirm that not only are students actively participating in class, but also that the class activities foster active learning and keep the students mentally engaged. I have fostered English-language active learning through a series of poetry writing exercises spaced equally throughout the semester. These writing exercises coupled with an English intensive study of Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no hosonokajima* have had a positive effect on learning outcomes, as is evidenced by the fact that students who participated in the class won honorable mention in an international *haiku* contest. Therefore, introducing students to a variety of warm-up exercises to build their creative writing ability fosters active learning, and when performed in L2 can improve their ability to utilize English as a second language.

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