

***Haiku* and Creative Writing in the English Language Learning Classroom**

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Abstract

This paper describes a creative writing exercise referred to as “One-line Provided” and its perceived benefits to English language learners. Students did this exercise as part of a content-based English class that combined learning about Japanese literature and creative writing, namely *haiku* composition. Educators have extolled the benefits of creative writing in the classroom for decades. Gardner (1983) and Armstrong (1994) 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 programs throughout the world have been (re-) examining the effects of creative writing activities with respect to L2 learning environments (Zhao, 2011). Such programs and 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.

With the goal of teaching English through creative writing, the author began teaching a university seminar course titled “Journey to the Interior” to English language students. Throughout the semester, students read the master *haiku*-poet Matsuo Bashō’s *Oku no hosomichi* in English translation. The book is a work of pre-modern Japanese prose travel-writing interspersed with *haiku*. Aside from the assigned reading and discussions about various aspects of the book, students also performed a series of poetry writing exercises using English, and gradually began to compose their own English *haiku*. 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.

1. Introduction

Although most any researcher or language educator can identify creative writing when they see it, specific definitions of creative writing are difficult to standardize, which consequently makes conducting quantitative-research on creative writing difficult. This obscure feature of creative writing is the reason that quantitative research is rarely conducted to

investigate the effects of creative writing in secondary language acquisition, both from the perspective of the learner (how language is learned) and from the instructor (how language is taught). Also, the term “creative writing” refers to a broad scope of writing genres such as novels, short stories, poems, song lyrics, etc., each of which has a rather fluid definition depending on the school of writing in which one was trained or, more often than not, on the whim of the author. Furthermore, poetry, as a category, is said to consist of nearly fifty types of poetic forms in English alone, including sonnets, acrostics, ballads, eclogue, and dozens more. These numerous forms and types of poems make quantitative investigations about poetry and its effects on language learning quite challenging.

Another obstacle to using creative writing, specifically poetry, in the language learning environment is the way in which language is manipulated to compose a poem. In typical language learning settings, both teachers and learners alike rely on certain agreed upon rules, like those guiding syntax or grammar. The mastery of (or, lack-of) such rules helps educators identify language learning stages as well as determines whether the learner is able to communicate successfully in the target language or not. In many of the most popular poems however, syntactical and grammatical rules are purposely cast aside in order for the author to express some deeper meaning using the language. Such a lack of standard rules in poetry with which to gauge one’s mastery of a language makes it very difficult to conduct quantitative research on language learners since actual errors made by the language learner *cum* poet could be mistakenly perceived as something that the poet purposefully wrote.

With the aforementioned obstacles in mind, this paper discusses the perceived success in teaching English *haiku* composition to English L2 learners. This paper will show the method and teaching approach that the author used to teaching *haiku*-writing—an approach that can be used to conduct studies in the future and could allow for significant quantitative research.

2. Literature Review

Progressive educators have long advocated for the use of creative-writing in the classroom, even in non-language or language arts classes. American educators in the 1970s and 1980s utilized creative writing to address students’ individual learning styles in accordance with Multiple Intelligence Theory (Gardner, 1983; Armstrong 1994). Later, researchers like McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith (1986) extolled the benefits of creative writing to bolster critical thinking skills. Bonwell & Eison (1991) also promoted writing activities as one of the seven major characteristics of active learning. 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 in education, including language learning education and education in general.

In recent years creative writing has been the focus of foreign language education at the Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning (COERLL) at the University of Texas at Austin. Zsuzsanna Abrams, one of the researchers in this 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” (see, Center for Open Educational Resources and Language Learning, n.d.). 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 that may be worth noting 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 utilize creative writing as a means to better establish themselves within a given social context in which the L2 is desirable.

3. Method

I introduced the creative-writing exercise “One-line Provided” to a university-level, *haiku*-themed seminar class titled “Journey to the Interior.” The class met once a week for a total of fifteen classes. The goal I set for this group of students was to study Matsuo Bashō’s *Oku no hosomichi* in-depth, while teaching students to write *haiku* of their own. To that end, the course resembled something akin to a writer’s workshop rather than a traditional language class, which is to say that each individual class consisted of multiple writing exercises, a short discussion on the exercise, peer feedback, and teacher feedback. The manner in which I presented these approximately seven exercises was such that students would build their *haiku* writing skills gradually, while progressing through the exercises each week. 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 leading up to this one.

3.1 Participants

Akita University limits enrollment in *zemi*’s to 20 students. The number of students who have enrolled in the class over the years has ranged from 15 to 20. Peer feedback and teacher feedback are important steps in the “One-line Provided” exercise, so class size surely affects

how thoroughly this feedback is provided.

The class is open to all students, regardless of major, English language ability, or native language. Class participants have come from such diverse backgrounds as international studies, pre-med, and engineering. I have not conducted formal English language evaluations to gauge students' language ability. It should also be noted that not all students are native speakers of Japanese. While classes have consisted of mostly Japanese native speakers, students from Romania, China, Vietnam and Korea (all with varying English language abilities) have also enrolled in the class.

3.2 Materials

The course's required reading was *The Narrow Road to Oku* (Keene, 1996), which is a bilingual edition of the *haiku* poet Matsuo Bashō's *Oku no hosomichi*. This required reading served to provide students with new vocabulary that they could use in their own writing, as well as cultural and historical background for *haiku*. The themes and motifs that appear throughout the book also served to inspire students in their writing. The writing exercises that I present to the students are all in the form of handouts. Since we hold three class-wide *haiku* contests throughout the semester ideally students will refer to their handouts when composing their original poems for the contests.

3.3 "One-line Provided" Procedure

The series of writing exercises is meant to help foster students' creative-writing ability (in English) as well as to help them learn the mechanics of *haiku* composition. I select a few famous Japanese *haiku* that have been translated into English by scholars in the field. I then take the first "line" from each of these translated *haiku* and type it on an A5-sized paper. I distribute the handouts randomly, one per student. If there are 15 students in the class, I might select lines from five different *haiku*. When each student receives their line, they must add their own words to it, thus completing a *haiku*.

Table 1 shows some examples of lines that I provided to students for this exercise. One might notice that the number of syllables in each line varies. Two things should be noted: 1) while *haiku* usually appear in English and other foreign languages separated into three lines, the idea that *haiku* are composed of "three lines" in a 5-7-5 syllable pattern is somewhat of a misnomer—many (if not most) poets write *haiku* composed of seventeen syllables in one line. And, 2) the rule is that *haiku* are seventeen "syllables" long. This rule comes from classical Chinese poetry, in which the Japanese poetry tradition is rooted. Whether or not *haiku* in

English should be written with seventeen syllables is not germane, but it is a guideline that I strongly encourage in class. With this latter note in mind, if a student receives a four syllable “first-line,” then they are to write the remaining thirteen syllables, if it is five syllables, then they have to add twelve syllables, et cetera.

Table 1: Examples of first lines used for “One-line Provided” writing exercise

<i>Line provided</i>	<i>Number of syllables</i>
A little cuckoo	5
In the early summer rain	7
The clear Omono River	7
Across the fields	4
As the days go by	5

After receiving their handout, students have about 10 minutes to complete the *haiku* using their own words and expressions using the first line as inspiration. They are allowed to use dictionaries and the like for reference, but I ask them not to search for the line on the internet using their smartphones. The goal of the exercise is to stimulate their own creativity and not to “find the answer.” While they are writing their *haiku* I walk around the room to monitor their activity and to make sure that they stay on-task. I read the students’ work as they progress, offering only minimum assistance, for example, suggestions on preposition usage.

After about 10 minutes or so (this time can be adjusted to fit the needs of the class), I select some students to write their work on the board. Students can then compare what they have written with that of other students who had the same first line. It is also at this time that 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 them further understand English language usage in writing *haiku* since most of the translations are translated into seventeen syllables.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents some examples of *haiku* that students wrote using the first line “a little cuckoo.”

Table 2: *Haiku composed by students based on the line “a little cuckoo”*

	<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 coming As soon as possible!	17

4.1 Commentary

With regards to students who received the line “a little cuckoo,” students easily understood the words “a” and “little.” However I observed that many of them had to check the meaning of “cuckoo,” which is *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.

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? Regardless however, 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:

- 1) **Loudly** chirping in his nest
- 2) 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 successful *haiku* composition. However the verb "coming" appears to be in the progressive form, which, if so, should be written as "is coming." Like Student A, Student C may have excluded it on purpose to preserve the seventeen-syllable total. A more grammatically correct way of writing the second line would be:

Please tell me spring **is** coming

It 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!

Writing "spring is coming" would have put the *haiku* at a modest 1-syllable over the 17-syllable goal. Using the contraction "spring's" for "spring is" would have avoided that issue and displayed a firm knowledge of contraction usage.

4.2 Discussion

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 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 "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 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

Language learning researchers could conduct much more in-depth, quantitative research on the effectiveness of this writing exercise as well as on *haiku* writing by English language learners. For example, one could use control groups and assign various writing exercises to them, then evaluate the resulting *haiku* and compare syntax or grammar usage to test for inconsistencies. Students could also do pre-tests and post-tests in an attempt to gauge how or if their writing ability progresses after doing a particular writing exercise. However, I am of the opinion that teaching creative writing in the classroom does not have to be so clinical.

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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