

*Literature in practice***Creating Opportunities for Authentic Communicative Exchange:****Exploring Haiku, Tanka, and Senryu in English**

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Poetry can be an ideal way to introduce Communicative English to EFL students. As Kamata (2016) advised, “Literary texts provide meaningful contexts, involve a profound range of vocabulary, encourage cultural awareness and critical thinking, and serve as a stimulus for composition” (p. 5). A class of 23 university students majoring in English chose Japanese-language poetic forms of haiku, tanka and senryu as a basis for completing both written assignments and oral presentations. Some students elected to submit their own compositions of the final poetic form, senryu, in Japanese and English. The opportunity for students to select poems from their own literary tradition and present them to the teacher provided opportunities for authentic communicative exchange.

**Key words:** student reflections on Japanese poetry,  
student poetry composition, cross-cultural communicative exchange

**The Teaching Context**

Twenty-three English language majors in an elective course in the International Liberal Arts department at a national university in Japan were asked to choose Japanese poems, submit written assignments, and provide oral presentations about them in English. The assignments in the semester-long course were divided into three poetic genres: haiku, tanka, and senryu. The purpose of choosing Japanese rather than English-language poetry was to build upon prior knowledge (Hattie & Yates, 2014), by reflecting in English upon familiar Japanese-language poetic forms. An example of building upon prior knowledge is provided by Iida (2017), who recommended that Japanese learners of English learn to write in the genre of haiku because of its cultural familiarity. In the current study, reflecting on haiku was supplemented by reflecting on both tanka and senryu.

This course had previously been taught for several years in face-to-face mode. The COVID-19 pandemic began when I was visiting my country of Australia in February 2020. I suddenly became unable to return to Japan and had to learn how to conduct classes using Zoom. The university approved the use of distance

learning and purchased a Zoom subscription for teachers who wished to use it. Because I had previously taught this course, and because my home city of Adelaide, Australia has only a thirty-minute time difference with Japan in the spring semester, the transition to distance learning caused minimal disruption. For a more detailed discussion of how I implemented distance learning, see Stephens (2020a).

**Japanese Poetic Forms of Haiku, Tanka and Senryu**

The students were familiar with haiku, tanka and senryu from their pre-university education. Japanese children are familiar with both reading and composing haiku. Even primary school children in Year One may be required to regularly compose haiku (Stephens, 2020b).

Haiku consist of three lines of five, seven and five syllables. Tanka consist of five lines of five, seven, five, seven, and seven syllables. Senryu have the same five-seven-five syllabic structure as haiku but differ in content. Unlike haiku, senryu do not begin with a seasonal reference, and the content is typically satirical or ironic. The name senryu derives from the poet Karai Senryū (1718–90), whose humorous poems were first published in 1765 (Schreiber, 2018). There are various

genres of senryu, such as *salaryman* senryu, which depict the trials of corporate life. An unlikely topic consists of one proposed by a company producing socks (Okamoto Socks), which holds a contest for patrons to contribute senryu lamenting the anxieties of having smelly feet (*ashikusa* senryu) (Okamoto Group, n.d.).

### Assignments

There were three types of assignments over the course of the semester, and students were free to choose any poem within the set genre. The first was a written assignment of 200 words, requiring the students firstly to summarize the poem (100 words), and provide a personal response to it (100 words). Students submitted five written assignments over the semester. They found the poems from a variety of sources. Some chose poems that they had studied in pre-university education. Others found poems from library books, and others through internet searches. The second assignments were two oral presentations consisting of the same content as two of the written assignments. After each oral presentation students were divided into pairs for discussion using the breakout room function on Zoom, after which they returned to the group and posed questions to the presenter in English.

The final assignment was to compose a senryu in Japanese and English, and to provide an accompanying illustration, on the themes of life during COVID, human relationships, or life as a student. This assignment was for extra credit. Although Japanese-language compositions of senryu conformed to the five-seven-five syllabic structure, English translations were not required to conform to this structure. Five-seven-five is a familiar syllabic structure in the Japanese language, and therefore many students can compose senryu with ease. The purpose of the English translation was to convey the message rather than conform to a prescribed number of syllables.

### Interpretation of Poems

*Why use Poetry in the Communicative English class?*

One of the reasons that poetry is a suitable subject for Communicative English classes is that it permits students to interpret the text themselves. According to Joritz-Nakagawa (2012),

[B]ecause various interpretations of a poem are always possible, poems can be good stimuli for pair and group discussions as working out what

poems may mean or what varying reactions students have to them is a chance for meaningful classroom communication (p. 17).

Similarly to Joritz-Nakagawa, Iida (2017) stressed the importance of student voice in the interpretation of poetry:

Of particular importance is for the instructor to guide students to have their own interpretation of the poem and share it with their classmates. In this way, they can understand the concept of multiple interpretations in that each reader has his or her own responses to the poem. This approach enables students to interpret the poem in a descriptive, non-judgmental way (p. 266).

One of the goals of the class was to stimulate discussion. Discussion, in turn, fosters the skills of listening carefully to other students' presentations, thinking deeply about the intention of the poet, and interpreting the poem in terms of their own life experience. Both Joritz-Nakagawa (2012) and Iida (2017) above highlighted this process of having students interpret poetry. In order to interpret a poem, students need firstly to understand the poet's intent, and then make a connection with their lived experience. Accordingly, the process not only fosters English language communicative skills, but also the processes of reflection and honing their thoughts.

### *Examples of Students' Interpretation of Poetry*

One student presented his favorite tanka, written by poet Fumiko Nakajo (1922–1954). He identified the complexity of the coexistence of beauty and sadness when looking at fireworks. The beauty of the fireworks is fleeting, because they appear and then immediately disappear. I was struck by the student's fresh insight and appreciated how teachers can also learn from students. The opportunity for the students to select their own poem opened up genuine communicative possibilities that would not have arisen had I provided the text myself.

An excerpt of the student's assignment appears below:

Today, I would like to introduce Tanka written about fireworks. 「音高く 夜空に花火 うち開き われは隈なく 奪われている」. It means that the author was deprived of her mind by beauty of fireworks. This Tanka

written by Fumiko Nakajo. She was born in Hokkaido. She got married and has children. But she would often fight with her husband. To make matters worse, her husband prevented her from writing Tanka. Finally, she decided to live separate from husband. So, there are many Tanka written about her complains to husband.

I think this Tanka is express not only beauty but also her sadness. When I saw this Tanka for the first time, I thought this Haiku express only beauty. However, I thought it includes her sad feeling when I learned about her life. For now, I will explain reason why I chose this Tanka. I like fireworks and this Tanka remind me of fireworks display held in my hometown every July (called “Minato Matsuri). That’s why I chose this Tanka as a subject of homework. Fireworks always entertain visitors. However, it also gave them sadness because it is disappear immediately. This sadness is one of the reason that people fascinated by it. As the author said, every people deprived of their mind by fireworks which has a moment of shine. (Kōsei Itō)

Another student chose a prize-winning senryu from an annual Youth Senryu Contest held at Shikoku University (Kōbo Online, n.d.). This senryu featured three homophones for the word *shin-yū*, each represented by a separate character and therefore possessing separate meanings, which the student translated as ‘new friend, close friend and best friend’. This reflects the pattern of establishing new friendships at university. Once students reach university, they meet other students from both distant parts of the prefecture, and from other prefectures. Students make new friends, and their shared experiences at university may foster increasingly closer friendships.

新友が 親友になり 心友に  
(shin-yū ga shinyū ni nari shinyū ni)

A new friend becomes a close friend,  
and the close friend becomes the best

(Poet: Akari Nakano. Natsu Takan, 2020)  
(Acknowledgement to Mayu Okamoto)

## Composition of Poems

### *Rationale for Students to Compose Poetry*

According to Bruner, (1996) learning “is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them” (p. 84). The composition of *senryu* in this class, while not conforming to all of Bruner’s description, was at least participatory, proactive, and served to construct meaning. In regard to language learning in particular, Kamata (2016) argued that “creative writing exercises help to give students a sense of responsibility for their own learning” (p. 5).

### *Students’ Poetry*

The following poems were selected, and the authors of these poems gave permission for their compositions to be shared and for their names to appear. The *senryu* below demonstrates student investment in their language learning because of the intrinsically personal nature of their compositions. The first student, Mayu, wrote two senryu about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted her life (See Figure 1). The first one explained how confinement to her home made her uneasy when interacting with people other than family members in the workplace. The second expressed how she missed face-to-face conversations with her friends about trivial matters that she had formerly taken for granted.

I composed two Senryu about recent life.

One is 「久々に 人と喋ると 空回り」  
[(Hisabisa ni hito to shaberu to karamawari)]. I translate it into English, “When I talk with someone, I spin my wheels because I haven’t talked with anyone for a long time.” I didn’t go to university during the first semester, so I went out only for my part-time job. When I was talked to by my boss or senior in the cram school where I work, I felt my heart beating because I didn’t often talk with people other than my family.

The other is 「なんでもない 友との会話が 恋しいな」 [(nan demo nai tomo to no kaiwa ga koishī na)]. I translate it into English, “I miss trivial conversation with my friends.”

When I went to university and talked with my friends every day, I didn’t notice it was important and precious. I send messages on [messaging app] LINE with them now, but I

would like to talk about meaningless things such as lunch, sweets, and studying face to face.

### Figure 1

*Two illustrated Senryu. Text and pictures by Mayu Okumoto*



The following senryu similarly discussed isolation during the pandemic, explaining the student's renewed appreciation of friendship.

自粛中 気づかされたよ 友のよさ  
(jishuku-chū kizukasareta yo tomo no yosa)

While staying home  
Being aware of  
The wonderfulness of friends

(Poet: Misaki Okita)

The next senryu explained how the social isolation during the pandemic leads to sisters appreciating the contact they have with each other, enabling them to reinterpret even their quarrels favourably.

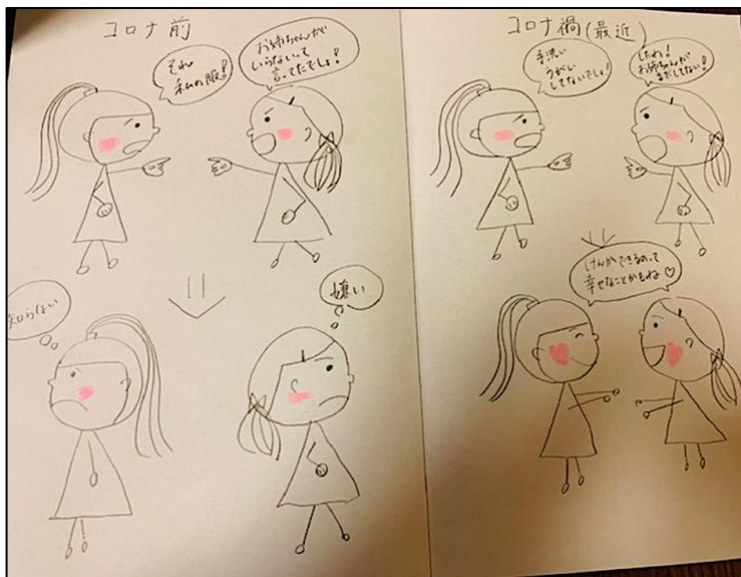
コロナ禍は 姉妹喧嘩も 幸となる  
(korona-ka wa shimai kenka mo kō to naru)

In COVID-19 related confusion,  
even quarrels between sisters  
make me happy!

(Poet: Riko Okada)

## Figure 2

Illustration of the meaning of a senryu. Text and pictures by Riko Okada



### Translation

Before Corona:

**Big Sister:** You're wearing my clothes!

**Little Sister:** Didn't you say you didn't need them?

**Big Sister** (*thought bubble*): I didn't know that.

**Little Sister** (*thought bubble*): I hate her.

After Corona:

**Big Sister:** You haven't washed your hands or gargled!

**Little Sister:** I did, but you haven't.

**Both sisters** (*thought bubble*): We can have a quarrel, so maybe that's a good thing.

The next senryu expressed the students' dissatisfaction at having overeaten when being confined to the home during the pandemic:

コロナ下で 自宅待機で 体重増加  
(korona-ka de jitaku taiki de taijū zōka)

Under the situation of COVID,  
I stay home.  
So, I gain weight.

(Poet: Mai Tomita)

### Concluding Remarks

Reflecting on and discussing Japanese poetry in English enables students to move from the known to the unknown. This provides a genuine communicative gap as they explain their own literary tradition to a teacher who may not be from that literary tradition, and as they present their various interpretations of the poems to their classmates. Discussing and composing poetry provides an opportunity for personalization; the students can create poetry with reference to their own lives, which facilitates language learning. Most importantly, reflecting on and composing poetry is enjoyable, which in turn improves student engagement.

### Author biography

Meredith Stephens is Professor of TESOL at Tokushima University, in International Liberal Arts. She holds a B.A. and a Dip. Ed. from the University of Adelaide, a Master of Applied Linguistics from Macquarie University, and has also studied at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and Yokohama National University. She writes on second language pedagogy, childhood bilingualism and biliteracy, and expatriate motherhood. She also enjoys creative writing, and her short stories have appeared in *The Blue Nib*, *Transnational Literature*, *The Font*, *Borderless Journal*, and *Quarantine Stories*.

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