

The Use of Haiku in Teaching English (1)

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1. Introduction

Haiku is a form of poetry that Japanese people have practiced for centuries. It expresses nature in each season as its theme, reflecting a flame of the Japanese mind in everyday life. The combination of five and seven syllables in the 17-syllable poem creates harmonious sound, which can soothe people's minds with its rhythm. It sounds good to the ears of Japanese people and is therefore easy to remember. In Japan haiku is usually introduced in elementary school, so most people in Japan know how to create a haiku poem. Thus, haiku's popularity among many Japanese people has caused it to become a part of Japanese culture while it still survives as a typical style of Japanese poetry in literature. Takai (2001) discusses the importance of using students' own culture in learning a foreign language, and examines how haiku can be incorporated into the syllabus of teaching English as a foreign language in Japan.

According to the results of a recent survey (JACET, 1993) on English education in Japan, the principal goal of learning English was to be able to communicate with a native speaker; and its ability of communication was defined as the competence to use English. Katayama et al. (1999) state that the model of the target language in Japanese English education has been English used among native speakers of English. Before World War II, British English was used in the English language textbook in public schools; after the war, American English was chosen

as the textbook model. The goal of learning English has been set as to ultimately become a native-like speaker of the target language. For example, the aim of the audio-lingual method is to eliminate all the errors resulting from the influence of the first language and to make the learners' target language as similar to that of native speakers.

Though we hear some success stories in acquiring the language, there are some drawbacks in this goal. One of them is that English may be used only when the learners have to communicate with a native speaker or a teacher of English in a classroom. Otherwise, Japanese, the first language, is used as a means of daily communication in Japan. English has been considered as a subject of study in school and would be used for a special occasion such as in answering teacher's questions or speaking to a foreigner. The learners always depend on the judgments of the teacher or a native speaker as to whether their English is correct or not every time they open their mouths. They may be far from achieving their own self-esteem in English.

There are, however, various kinds of English in the world. According to Honna (1993), more than 30 million people use English as their first language and more than 100 million people use it as a second language. English is now considered as a tool for communicating internationally and has numerous varieties. Honna (1993) discusses the justification for the varieties of English in the English speaking world. Different varieties of English are spoken in the United States, England, and Australia and other varieties are spoken in Asia, Europe, and Africa. English is used to express people's thoughts, ways of thinking, and identities. It becomes a tool of intercultural communication. It is one of the languages used in India, Korea, the United States, and other parts of the world. No one has to become more like Americans, the British, or the

Australians, and yet we can keep the varieties of English as an international language.

Connor (1996) discusses the situation of teaching English in the world, and states that the majority of learners of English in the world are being taught by non-native English teachers so that it is unrealistic to think these teachers use only one single model of standardized English, such as Anglo-American English. As long as it is intelligible, non-native English should be recognized.

It is important to help students realize for themselves that English can be one of their own languages to express their feelings and thoughts in their own cultural frameworks without jeopardizing their own identity. Teaching the varieties of English is not enough. Teaching how to use English within the students' cultural background is one of the ways for students to develop self-esteem in using English.

This paper analyzes students' attitudes toward the teaching technique of using haiku for learning English and discusses the pros and cons of using haiku poetry to correlate learners' cultural background with learning material in an EFL situation.

2. Research questions and hypotheses to be tested

The following research questions were formulated:

- (1) Does haiku motivate Japanese students to write English since haiku is regarded as part of their own culture?
- (2) In learning English, do Japanese students develop self-esteem by using haiku as learning material?

English textbooks are usually written within the cultural framework of the target language, which sometimes hampers the learners'

comprehension in reading and listening (McDonough, 1995, p. 42). It should be easier for the learners to understand the content if the learning materials share the schema of the learners' background knowledge (Johns, 1997). Cummins (1983) explains the developmental process of language proficiency in relation to learners' contextual knowledge and cognition. When the learning materials are contextually embedded, learners may acquire the target language with less difficulty than otherwise. Krashen (1985) also explains in his affective filter hypothesis that it becomes easier for learners to acquire the target language when the learning materials are familiar to the learners. Based upon these arguments, the hypotheses to be tested in this research are as follows:

1. Students are interested in dealing with haiku as a material for learning English.
2. Haiku motivates Japanese students to write English.
3. Students develop their self-esteem in writing haiku in English.

3. Method

The participants of this study were 260 Japanese university students in five English classes, among which four classes were offered in the day time, and one in the evening time program. In the day time program, there were 52 students in the second year English "A" class, 52 in the second year English "B" class, 51 in the second year English "C" class, and 56 in the first year English class. In the evening time program were 49 second year students.

About one third of the class time was used for teaching haiku in each class session for four months of the one year English course in 2001. The teaching procedures were as follows.

First, students were introduced to why haiku was being used for the teaching material in learning English. Students were asked how much they knew about haiku and whether they had made a haiku poem before. Thus, the basic information on haiku was introduced and reviewed through discussion of haiku in Japanese.

Second, students were asked to compare a Japanese haiku poem to an English poem in their styles and techniques. Since the topics of the poems are similar, i.e. a flower, the following poems were compared:

When I look carefully
 I see the nazuna blooming
 By the Hedge!
(Yoku mireba
Nazuna hana saku
Kakine kana)

Basho (1644-94)

Flower in the crannied wall,
 I pluck you out of the crannies;
 Hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
 Little flower but if I could understand
 What you are, root and all in all,
 I should know what God and man is.

Tennyson (1890-92)*

Third, traditional Japanese haiku poems were introduced and discussed. Students were asked to try to translate them into English and to compare them with the given model translations. Students were

encouraged to make their own haiku using the model translations for reference. Here are some haiku poems used in class:

Furuike ya

Kawazu tobikomu

Mizu no oto

(Basho)

Old pond...

A frog leaps in

Water's sound

(translated by W. J. Higginson)

Kare eda ni

Karasu tomari keri

Aki no kure

(Basho)

On a barren branch

A raven has perched—

Autumn dusk

(translated by W. J. Higginson)

Shizukesa ya

Iwa ni shimiiru

Semi no koe

(Basho)

The stillness—

Soaking into stones

Cicada's cry

(translated by W. J. Higginson)

Fourth, in the final examination a questionnaire was included asking students how much they became interested in haiku lessons in each class. The students were asked to rate 1 as being the least interested and 5 as being the most interested, and to write the comments on the haiku lessons.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the questionnaire regarding students' interest in haiku lessons in English class. About 68% of the total students showed interest in the haiku lessons by responding 4 or 5 in the questionnaire. About 71% of the first year students showed such interest, while about 65% of the day time second year students and about 76% of the evening time second year students showed interest in them. Figure 1 shows the interests of students as a whole in the haiku lessons. Figure 2 shows the interest of the students in each class in the haiku lessons.

Table 1 Interest in haiku lessons.

	Evening Class	Day time A	Day time B	Day time C	Day time freshman	Total
Least interest 1	2	2	1	1	2	8
2	6	6	7	2	5	26
3	4	12	14	11	9	50
4	19	18	22	25	28	112
Most interest 5	18	14	8	12	12	64
Total	49	52	52	51	56	260

There were 243 comments regarding the haiku lessons. Among

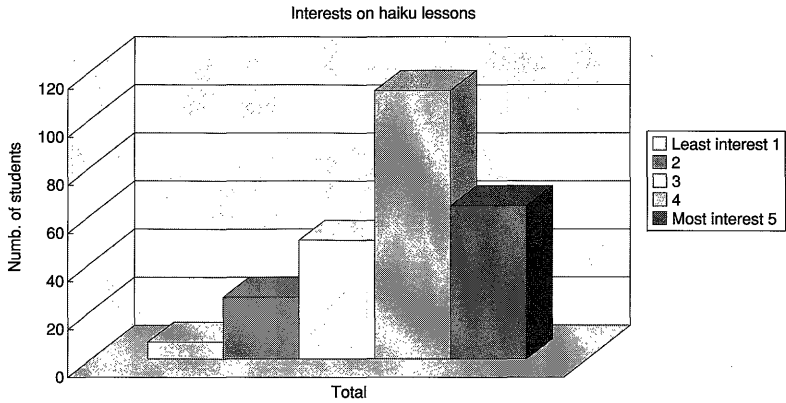


Figure 1 Interest of students as a whole.

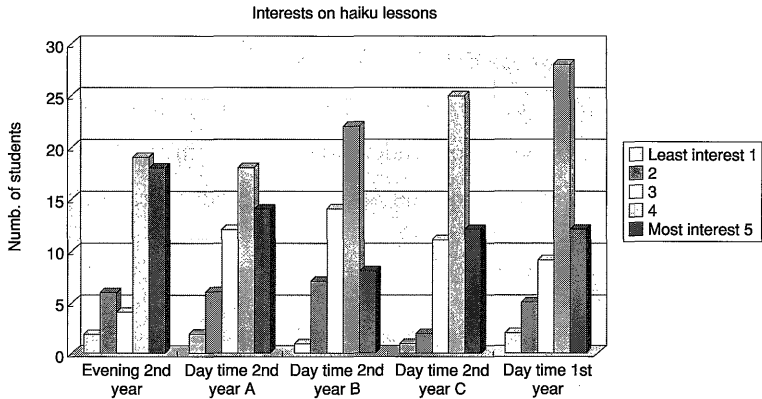


Figure 2 Interest of students in each class.

the positive responses, 65 comments were related to the students' self-esteem, for example,

- 1) "Since I learned how to make Japanese haiku poems in high school, I enjoyed this lesson very much. I was motivated to translate some of my favorite Japanese haiku poems into English (a second year student in the evening class)."

Here are some other examples:

- 2) "I have never imagined that we could express haiku poems in English before I took this class. Now I think it is marvelous to translate the Japanese traditional poems into English, which combines eastern culture to western culture (a second year student in the evening class)."
- 3) "I found it interesting to translate Japanese haiku poems into English. I was motivated to try to translate more Japanese poems into English (a first year student in a day time class)."
- 4) "Before taking this class, I had believed that haiku was the traditional culture unique to Japan, but I was surprised to know that it was translatable into English and enjoyed among people in the western countries. When I tried to make one in English, I felt it difficult to write a poem in 17 syllables. But apart from the strict rules, we could make a haiku poem with the original rhythms in English (a second year student in the B class)."
- 5) "A haiku poem is made with a few words and gives enough imagination to the readers. I found it possible to do the same thing in an English haiku poem (a second year student in the A class)."

On the other hand, among the negative responses, 49 students expressed that haiku should be written and appreciated in Japanese, not in any other language since it is originated in Japan, for example,

- 6) "When translated into English, a haiku poem would lose its uniqueness of Japanese culture (a second year student in the evening class)."

Here are some other examples:

- 7) "When translated into English, a haiku poem lost its original, visual images expressed in Japanese. I've got used to appreciating a haiku poem in Japanese 17 syllables, which rhythm is significant to

- Japanese people. However, I could not feel the same feelings to an English haiku poem (a second year student in the evening class).”
- 8) “Cultures such as poems are a regional product, which makes the culture so profound and genuine. Translating a haiku poem into English is insensitive and loses its authenticity (a first year student in a day time class).”
- 9) “Japanese haiku has its nuance which cannot be translated into English (a second year student in the B class).”
- 10) “Haiku should be written in Japanese. I didn’t feel ‘*wabi or sabi* (which is an aesthetic sensitivity to appreciate simplicity in expression)’ in a haiku poem written in English (a second year student in the A class).”

5. Analysis and discussion

The first hypothesis concerning students’ interest in haiku as a learning material was supported by the results of the questionnaire. More than half the respondents showed interest in the haiku poems for learning English. It was noteworthy that a greater percentage of students in the evening class showed interest than of those in the day time classes. Almost 80% of the evening class students showed interest in the material (see Table 1). This is perhaps because the average age of students in the evening class was a little higher than that of students in the day time classes. In general, haiku is more popular among older generations in Japan. It is generally said among Japanese people that young generations are losing interest in the traditional culture in Japan.

The second hypothesis stating that haiku motivated students to write English was not necessarily supported, but some comments written

by the students showed how the haiku lesson motivated them to translate traditional haiku poems into English. Many of them had experience writing Japanese haiku poems in high school, which led the students to be interested in translating them into English (see ex. 1, 2 and 3). They also felt it rather easy to write a poem with a few words in three lines than to write an essay in English with many words in complex sentences (see ex. 4 and 5). However, there were some negative comments showing little motivation to write an English haiku poem (see ex. 6, 8 and 9). Japanese haiku is more familiar to many students than English haiku according to their comments (see ex. 7 and 10). It must have been surprising to many students when they were asked to translate a haiku poem into English (see ex. 4).

Out of 243 comments, 114 were related to the students' self-esteem. Out of these 114 comments, 65 of them were positive, and 49 were negative. More than half of the students commented that they could enjoy writing a haiku poem in English since the Japanese version was already familiar to them (see ex. 1). It is possible to say, therefore, that we can see a sign that students develop their self-esteem in writing haiku in English. Hence, the third hypothesis regarding the development of students' self-esteem in English haiku can be supported by this research.

6. Conclusion

Haiku is a form of poetry which has reflected Japanese people's close relation to nature in everyday life. People are attracted by the simplicity and harmonious rhythm that is embedded in haiku poems. When presented a haiku poem well-known among Japanese people, students responded to the translation exercise without great difficulty. One

reason is the students can get the image of what the poem is trying to convey. Since the topic is within the realm of their cultural framework, students can activate and use their background knowledge for their comprehension of the poem. Thus, dealing with material which corresponds to their own culture is important to maintaining self-esteem in learning a foreign language. Another reason is the fact that haiku comprises three lines with 17 syllables. It is rather easier for the learner, especially a beginner, to make a short sentence in English. Creating a short sentence by using a haiku poem is on the threshold of writing a paragraph.

One of the important challenges in teaching a foreign language is how to motivate students, because, as proverb says, “You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make it drink.” Using their cultural background to activate their own knowledge is not only important to motivate students but also to maintain self-esteem in learning a foreign language.

Note:

- * These poems were cited from the hand-out, “East and West Comparison Through the Poems” at the workshop, “Japanese Mindscapes and Patterns of Communication” conducted by Muneo Yoshikawa in the 2000 intercultural communication summer seminar at Pacific University in Oregon, sponsored by the Intercultural Communication Institute.

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