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Using haiku in Japanese EFL high schools: Challenges and issues of teaching L2 haiku composition

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English Language Teaching in Japanese High Schools

One of the principal goals of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Japanese contexts is to foster Japanese who can use practical English. With this goal, the focus of ELT has shifted from teaching the grammatical aspects to developing communicative language proficiency. However, there are many Japanese teachers of English who depend on traditional teaching approaches, such as Grammar-Translation Method or Audiolingual Method. This reliance is related to the college entrance examinations and high school students tend to be motivated to study English only by marking higher scores in English tests. On the other hand, teacher-centered and grammar-focused approaches prevent students from developing L2 communication skills.

Under this situation, one of the issues of ELT in Japanese high schools is motivation. Memorization of grammatical and lexical items is boring and this learning approach may demotivate students to study English. Another issue comes from what writing class should be in high school contexts. In this class, writing is regarded as just translating from Japanese to English (or from English to Japanese), not as constructing and developing arguments; in other words, students are not trained to express what they really want to say in English. L2 learners are, in general, motivated to study English through the experience of producing English in oral and written formats. From this viewpoint, learning to write their own ideas, thoughts, opinions, or emotions is necessary for the development of L2 communicative proficiencies and it doesn't occur without these writers' internal and psychological concerns.

The Nature of Haiku

Haiku consists of structurally designed features: a three line poem which includes a 5-7-5 syllable pattern, a seasonal reference associated with a particular season, and a *cutting word*, which can be either an actual word or a punctuation mark (Iida, 2010) prompting reflection by dividing the poem into two parts; this creates an imaginative distance, though both sections remain, to some degree, independent of each other (Toyomasu, 2001).

The use of haiku is effective to develop a greater sense of voice in L2 writing (Iida, 2008, 2010). A written text in haiku is viewed as the performance of self. Matsuo Basho's perspective, "learn about pines from the pine and bamboo from bamboo" (Hass, 1994, p. 233) means that haiku should be the writer's direct response to the natural world. Of particular importance is to keep a balance between the writer's internal thought and the external world. From this perspective, haiku is the production of "the writers' voices reflecting cultural contexts" (Iida, 2008, p. 174). This humanistic approach allows the writers to develop voice, which is their message to an audience.

Benefits and Challenges of Haiku to Japanese EFL High Schools

The benefit of applying haiku to L2 education is for the students to use their existing linguistic and cultural knowledge. Different from writing papers in English, the nature of haiku such as brevity, simplicity or easiness can decrease their anxiety of using English and increase their confidence in writing in the target language. Acquiring vocabulary in terms of phonics is another benefit of using haiku. This aspect of language learning deals with the issue in which the students simply memorize lexical items and instead, students can gain awareness of the syllables and accents of vocabulary items in the process of composing L2 haiku.

More importantly, using haiku enables the students to write something relevant to their own real-life experience (Iida, 2010). Doing so allows for a greater understanding of the concept of voice in writing. Using haiku opens the possibility for the students to use the target language to express what they want to say. This approach is efficient to develop their communication skills by shifting the focus more on output than input.

The challenge of using haiku in Japanese high schools is how to maintain a balance between grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency. Japanese high school students are required to use English grammar accurately, which leads to passing the entrance examinations. On the other hand, teachers are expected to develop the students' communication skills under the educational system, which is the main goal of ELT in Japan. There still exists the room to use L2 haiku in high school education, but Japanese EFL teachers need to negotiate the following elements: goals of the course; purposes of using the literary genre; students' needs; and teachers' beliefs. With this negotiation, they should make decisions of when and how to use haiku in class.

Conclusion

The discussion of using a literary genre in EFL contexts is not whether it should be used but how to use it (Iida & Iijima, in press). Poetry writing involves the writer's reflective and linguistic negotiation concerning his or her experience (Hanauer, 2010) and haiku is not the exception for this. As discussed in this paper, L2 haiku composition puts the writer at the center in language learning and allows students to raise awareness of voice in writing. The use of haiku will be an effective learning approach to develop written communication skills for Japanese EFL high school students by going beyond the perspective of learning English for college entrance examinations.

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