



# Difficulties in L2 songwriting

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This paper identifies the difficulties faced by Japanese songwriters who write their songs in English. Data from interviews and songwriting workshops is presented to show how difficulties arise because of linguistic ability, identity, translation, matching words and music, and songwriting skills.

この論文で英語で作曲作詞を行っている日本人の問題点を見分ける。インタビューそれにソングライティング・ワークショップのデータを提供して、以下の所から問題点が出やすいです：言語能力、アイデンティティ、翻訳、歌詞と曲の組み合わせ、それで作曲の技術。

**T**he roots of this study lie way back in 1992 when I began writing lyrics for a Japanese rock singer called Yasuhisa. Over a period of about ten years, I wrote about 60 songs for him which he sang with four different bands, two of which broke up depressingly soon after I had written the songs.

Over a period of several years, several things led me to the opinion that Yasuhisa should be writing his own lyrics. Firstly, I felt that I was deskilling him. When I met him, he had been writing English lyrics, but very quickly he had come to rely entirely on me and stopped writing himself. Secondly, I got tired of writing songs for bands that disbanded so quickly. Finally, I was getting more interested in English as an international language and felt that singers like Yasuhisa should be expressing their own identity through their songwriting rather than relying on native speaker songwriters.

A few years later, these beliefs were strengthened when a private student, Toshiko, asked me for help in checking her lyrics. When I looked at the lyrics, I saw a lot of correction was going to be needed. Toshiko's English grammar and vocabulary were very poor. From my viewpoint at that time, I believed that if I were to correct lyrics with so many mistakes, they would become a new song, and hence I should be eligible for a small percentage of the royalties. This was not a good way to start off the lessons. She looked completely shocked at the idea and as a result I never saw her again and have no idea whether she ever completed her

songs. With hindsight, I see that I should have helped her to develop better L2 songwriting skills.

Like Yasuhisa and Toshiko, an increasing number of Japanese songwriters are writing in English. Elsewhere (Cullen, 2005) I have discussed their motivations including the desire to reach a bigger audience. Although it is beyond the scope of the current paper, the next section places the current study in a wider context.

### Related Literature

Songwriting is an act of creativity. There is a large body of research on creativity in general (eg. Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), and also on L1 creative writing (eg., Neman, 1995; Perry, 1999). More specifically in songwriting, there are many resources, particularly of the *how-to* variety for L1 songwriting (Braheny, 2002; Davis, 1994; Gillette, 1995; Kachulis & Feist, 2005). However, with some notable exceptions such as Zollo (2003), these do not reflect serious research in that they are based on limited data and insufficient rigour in methodological approach.

### L2 Writing Research

Hyland (2001) gives a good summary of the current state of L2 writing research. Many of the issues that he identifies as important in L2 writing such as the expression of identity and social relationships are also relevant to songwriting. In addition, if we consider songwriting as a form of ESP (English for Specific Purposes), there is a considerable body of research. ESP is the driving force behind much of L2 writing research, but this research is primarily focused on areas of wider

applicability such as writing for academic purposes or business (eg., Master & Brinton, 1998; Swales, 1990).

In the more relevant field of L2 creative writing, there has been relatively little research. Saborrosch (2000) has discussed the cognitive and imaginative aspects of L2 creative writing, and Scrader (2000) has looked at some of the mechanical aspects. There have been scatterings of writing on L2 poetry, mainly focusing on how poetry can be used in the classroom (Maley & Duff, 1989) and how writing poetry can help students to practice grammar and vocabulary (Moulton, 1997; Spiro, 2001), but there has been little research into the L2 poetry writing process.

Overall, we can conclude that while current research on creativity and L1 and L2 writing is informative and many of the methodological tools may be applicable to the current study, it is clear that there is a gap in our knowledge about L2 songwriting. While some websites offer advice for non-native speakers on how to write lyrics in English (eg., Kakira, 2006) and some interviews with L2 songwriters in songwriting books and magazines (eg. Pink, 2006) are illuminating, there appears to be no solid research. This study aims to fill some of this gap as well as contributing to the wider field of L2 writing.

### Objectives

The aim of the current research project is to identify difficulties facing writers like Yasuhisa and Toshiko who are writing their own songs in English. By the identification of these difficulties, it may be possible to design teaching materials which will help them to better achieve their goals.

Many of the difficulties in L2 songwriting are the same as the ones that face L1 songwriters. For example, all L1 songwriters need to have sufficient musical knowledge, motivation, and time to write songs (see Cullen, 2005 for more details), but the focus of this paper is on identifying difficulties which especially affect L2 songwriters.

While L2 songwriting is a fascinating area, some readers may rightfully question its relevance to their own teaching situation. To avoid any confusion from the beginning, it is useful to point out that this paper deals with difficulties facing Japanese songwriters rather than using songwriting as a teaching tool in the classroom. In other words, the focus is on language use rather than language acquisition. For those interested in using songwriting in the classroom, I recommend an earlier paper (Cullen, 2006).

### Methodology

Following Strauss and Corban's approach to grounded theory (1998), methodology is conceptualized as a systematic way to think about and study social reality, and no preconceived theory was brought to the research. Instead, in an attempt to study the social (and cognitive) reality, I utilized a number of different approaches in order to investigate which was the most effective in revealing the processes involved in L2 songwriting. These approaches included questionnaires, interviews, direct observation, diary studies, discourse analysis of interaction between songwriters, and thinkaloud protocol. All of these tools have been useful in offering increased understanding of the songwriting process, but for the purposes of this paper the data is drawn from interviews and songwriting workshops.

Initial semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty songwriters, both L1 and L2. These were followed up by further interviews where required. However, interviews reveal only what the songwriter believes she is doing and this may not always correspond with what she is actually doing. For example, one songwriter said that they always wrote lyrics before music, but in later observation they wrote lyrics to existing music. In addition, interviews provide a benefit to the researcher but little benefit to the songwriter. In order to create a mutually beneficial situation, I started one-to-one songwriting workshops in which I could help the L2 songwriter develop her songwriting as well as carry out the research. This intervention in the form of workshops places the research firmly into a researcher as participant ethnological framework.

To date, I have carried out the workshops with five L2 songwriters. In general, the workshop was held for between an hour and ninety minutes once a week. All of the workshops were videoed and the dialogue was transcribed where deemed useful. Apart from my fieldnotes, the video, and the transcript of the session, I also made photocopies of the songwriters' lyrics at various stages of completion. The combination of these data sources draws on much of my earlier work in trialling the different approaches of diary studies, direct observation, and so on described above. Together, they provide a rich, if rather messy, picture of the writing process.

The following sections describe the difficulties identified in the interviews and songwriting workshops. The discussion is divided into two parts. Part 1 addresses the difficulties cited by the songwriters themselves. Part 2 outlines the

difficulties as viewed by the teacher and researcher. In anthropological terms, these can be seen as emic and etic points of view.

### Part 1: Difficulties cited in interviews by L2 songwriters

The quotes in this section are primarily extracted from the interviews with L2 songwriters, but also draw upon data from the songwriter workshops.

#### Language ability

As is to be expected, the greatest difficulties faced by L2 songwriters arise from their imperfect language ability, summarized in Table 1.

Insufficient vocabulary is a major problem which manifests itself in many ways. The songwriters report difficulty in finding the right words to express their thoughts and feelings (quotes 1, 2). Even when their language ability is good, songwriters like Keisuke realize that it may not be enough as they may still lack an understanding of the different nuances of English words (3). An additional problem of insufficient vocabulary is that it can lead to a perceived lack of imagination (4). While mistakes in nuance of vocabulary may result in something that sounds interesting, this is unlikely to be true of grammar (5). For example, the lyric by Kentaro “Driving to the beauty ocean” is grammatically inaccurate and would grate upon the ear of most native speakers, but his replacement for it, “Driving to the crystal ocean” is interesting even though it is a collocation that most native songwriters would be unlikely to come up with. Another interesting example in this context from

Table 1. Language ability

<i>Insufficient vocabulary</i>	1. “I don’t have enough vocabulary. I don’t have enough variants” (Yoshi)
<i>Finding the right words</i>	2. “Using the right words [is difficult]. I don’t think that my vocabulary is good enough ... In conversation, this is fine because I find alternative words to express what I want to say. But in songs, part of the attraction is the use of exactly the right words to express the meaning that I want.” (Hiroki)
<i>Nuances</i>	3. Oh well the nuance [is difficult]...Cause for the foreign people, there’s not so much difference between ‘bitch’ and female dog (laughing).
<i>Limited vocabulary leads to limited originality</i>	4. “[It is difficult] ... to make each songs sound original and to make it meaningful in the limited song frame. What I mean is to try not to use similar and/or same words and expression over and over. For example, if I always used “I love you” in many songs, it would be quite boring.” (Hiroki)
<i>Grammar</i>	5. “Because English is not my mother tongue, sometimes I make grammatic errors.” (Kentaro)

Kentaro is “that’s just one more rainy reason”. Here he meant to say ‘season’, but a spelling mistake produces the much more interesting *rainy reason*. Also see Ikakura (2006) for more examples from better-known artists.

#### Identity

The theme of the JALT2006 conference (Juggling Community, Identity, Motivation) recognized that the ability and motivation to use language for a particular purpose such as songwriting is tied up with identity. The quotes in Table 2 indicate some of the difficulties which can be grouped under the catch-all term identity.

Table 2. Identity

Own standards	6. "I am extremely particular about lyrics and there's no way that I can come anywhere near my instincts ... in a foreign language."
Expressing life	7. "If ... the singer doesn't understand the lyrics ... how can they sing their emotions, their feelings, their lives." (Daisuke)
Lack of language experience	8. "The only thing that I know is textbook English so I think that for native speakers, my songs are not natural ... I know only very very basic, for example in the textbook, so for me writing textbook English is not cool. I write more natural or more real, so I need your help." (Kentaro)
Lack of L2 life experience	9. "But I can't do that [write poems easily] in English. Language is different. Even when I read English poems that use those abstract combinations, I don't understand. It's because my experiences in L2 are limited."  10. "It's not going from experience, but from the Japanese version of the poem. For example, I was reading a poem in English class years ago and I couldn't understand why he used the word 'life' so much. In Japanese, we have lots of different words for it: 'seikatsu', 'jinsei', 'seimei' ... the meaning of the English word seems to fork." (Mitsuhiro)
Rhythm of Life	11. "Some of them are not really noticing about those kinds of rhythms because it's natural born thing ... but still if I use the Japanese word using those kinds of rhythm, it really doesn't sound like Japanese. Like a-na-ta (singing Japanese in rap rhythm), it doesn't sound like Japanese. 'A-NA-TA' is ok, but a-NA-ta is bad music sound" (Daisuke)

Quotes number six and seven remind us that all creators wish to be proud of what they create and have implicit or explicit standards for their work. This can be understood by considering that a song is an expression of their identity. However, for an L2 songwriter an over-awareness of weaknesses in vocabulary and grammar can lead to a lack of confidence with a resultant detrimental effect on creativity. Creativity is generally postulated in four stages called by various names in the literature. For example, as early as 1926, Wallas (cited in Plsek, 1996) termed these stages *Preparation* (definition of issue, observation, and study), *Incubation* (laying the issue aside for a time), *Illumination* (the moment when a new idea finally emerges) and *Verification* (checking it out). The early stages require a suspension of internal editing criteria whereas the later stages require a strong internal editor. By having standards that are too high at an early point in the writing of a song, the songwriter is unlikely to sufficiently suspend the internal editor and will probably cause a block to creativity.

Even if an L2 songwriter has excellent grammar and vocabulary as well as the ability to suspend the internal editor in the initial stages of creation, it may still not be enough. Some of the songwriters in the interviews expressed that they do not have a deep enough understanding of English to write competently in L2 (quote 8). Let us consider for a minute why this lack of deep understanding of English exists. In the interviews, the participants identified two important areas: lack of *language* experience (quote 8) and lack of *life* experience (quotes 9 & 10). To get around this lack of L2 life experience, Mitsuhiro often writes his poems first in Japanese and then translates them into English,

believing that this reduces the reliance on L2 life experience. However, translation raises other problems described in the next section. Daisuke expressed this same lack of L2 life experience in a different way (quote 11). Daisuke extends his thinking from the previous quote by talking about a boy in a baseball stand in the US selling hotdogs. His sales chant is like rap music. As well as not understanding the language perfectly, non-native speakers do not have the unconscious knowledge of the rhythm that runs through life and music in any selected area. He believes that one difficulty facing Japanese songwriters is that the rhythm of life doesn't always match the rhythm of music. Once facet of this is the difference between linguistic rhythm and musical rhythm. In English, these tend to overlap with the primary linguistic stresses falling on the primary musical stresses. In other languages such as French and Japanese, this is not necessarily so. Smiley and Cullen (2007) give a good example from a Japanese children's song in which the 'n' sound of Japanese appears on the primary musical stress of the bar, a mismatch between musical and linguistic stress that would be possible in English only where it was done for comic effect.

### Translation

Some Japanese songwriters first write in their native language and then translate into English. The participant in my current songwriting workshop conceptualizes L2 songwriting as only translation. He always writes out all the words in Japanese and then proceeds to translate it into English line by line. This often results in word order and other grammatical errors, but it also raises other problems,

even when language ability is very good. For example, some quotes from interviews with European L2 songwriters are shown in Table 3. In general, the level of English of these songwriters is much higher than their Japanese counterparts, but they still face problems when they try to translate directly.

Table 3. Translation

<i>Literal translation</i>	12. "... avoiding literal translation of common French language, finding the equivalent of what I could be thinking as a French sentence [is difficult] ..." (Dominique)
<i>Getting original meaning across</i>	13. "Let's say that I wrote a song in Portuguese, than I want to translate that song in to Italian, or English, it is hard to get the original meaning of the song when it is translated." (Hector)

These problems seem to be of a higher level than those shown in Table 1. By analogy with L2 writing, Table 1 shows problems of sentence grammar, whereas Table 3 shows problems of discourse. These differences are most clear in the quotes from the European songwriters who generally have a much higher level of English. For example, Dominique realizes that a literal translation is not good enough (quote 12). Similarly, Hector worries that the original meaning of the song may get lost in translation (quote 13).



**Other difficulties**

Some other difficulties given by the songwriters in the interviews are shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Other difficulties**

<i>Time-consuming</i>	14. “Writing songs in English is more troublesome” (Okada)
<i>Pronunciation</i>	15. “Pronunciation is difficult. I can look up words in the dictionary, but performance of my songs is a problem because I worry about my pronunciation. If I’m performing for only Japanese people, I don’t really mind, but when I perform for foreigners, I worry.” (Okada)
<i>Difference in phrase lengths between languages</i>	16. “More sounds are needed in Japanese. For example, “I love you” in English would be “Anata ga sukidesu” in Japanese.” So you need many notes in Japanese to express the same thing.” (Okada)  17. [my] “songs in Japanese tends to have longer lines than English songs. Maybe it’s because I’m better in Japanese than English...” (Keisuke)
<i>Rhymes</i>	18. “Rhymes are also difficult. For example “Just seventeen, know what I mean”. But rhymes are important. Can’t really rhyme in Japanese. I have never really thought about why.” (Okada)

Naturally, it can take more time to write something in a foreign language (quote 14) and this can cause a lack of focus, a problem that almost all the L1 and L2 songwriters expressed during the interviews, but this lack of focus is likely to cause even more difficulty when the process is more time-consuming. Pronunciation is also a problem that has a much bigger impact on L2 songwriters (quote 15). While, strictly speaking, pronunciation is quite a different issue to songwriting, many singer-songwriters write songs only for themselves and the performance of a song is just another aspect of writing it. The other issues in Table 4 will be touched on in the following section.

## Part 2: Difficulties as perceived by the teacher in songwriting workshops

The previous section presented and discussed difficulties facing L2 songwriters based on songwriter responses in interviews and workshops. This section takes a different perspective by looking at difficulties perceived by a teacher in L2 songwriting workshops. Songwriting workshops have several big advantages over interviews. Firstly, and most importantly, they are mutually beneficial. Secondly, they provide easy access to a rich form of data. They were held as weekly hour-long private songwriting workshops. The data presented below is from a series of twelve workshops with a single L2 songwriter, Kentaro. Each session was videoed and transcribed, a time-consuming, but highly informative process. In this way, it was possible for the teacher to determine additional difficulties by identifying problematic features of the song or by observing the songwriter working in the workshop.

*Lexical poverty*

Linguistic weaknesses such as vocabulary and grammar were identified by the songwriter in the previous section, but as Table 5 shows, even when the songwriters use correct grammar and vocabulary, they can still display lexical poverty.

Quote 19 shows the difficulty of making an appropriate word choice. Kentaro knows exactly what image he wants to convey, but he cannot come up with the right word. Even after interaction with the teacher, he is not sure how to choose the appropriate word to describe his image. Quote 20 demonstrates the opposite problem. Kentaro knows the phrase ‘stand by me’, but doesn’t quite understand the images associated with it, or realize how much of a cliché it has become.

*Matching words and music*

The need to match words and music is the primary defining characteristic of a song that distinguishes it from other types of writing. Japanese differs considerably from English in phonemes, rhythm, stress, and intonation. Table 6 shows just two of the difficulties which result.

Table 5. Lexical poverty

<i>Suitable word choice</i>	<p>19. Kentaro: So, I’m thought is for example, sky is image of the stars, how do you say,</p> <p>Brian: night view</p> <p>Kentaro: So I tried, but I failed, so I changed to like this style.</p> <p>Brian: So you wanted to create something like</p> <p>Kentaro: like a night view or something. This one is morning view, sky is blue and green, so I like to second part is more night and space and something like that</p> <p>Brian: Right, I see what you mean</p> <p>Kentaro: yeah, but I didn’t find it suitable word, so I wrote like this.</p> <p>... I’m not sure. If I find another more good word, I’d like to change ...</p>
<i>Cliché</i>	<p>20. Kentaro: maybe now considering which is better, so ‘stand by me’, ‘stand by me’</p> <p>Brian: Hmm (sounding very unenthusiastic about this phrase). Yeah, ‘stand by me’ is good but</p> <p>Kentaro: but many song, very similar song there ... My feeling is that it is a bit too similar with another song, so I think that’s a problem ... maybe too normal. That’s why it (the song) is not completed yet, so I’m considering which is better.</p> <p>... again, or if I find another good words, I will change, but at this point, ‘stay with me’</p>



Table 6. Matching words and music

<i>Syllable count</i>	<p>21. Kentaro: I think this is not good...nothing to eat from yesterday (tries to sing this line a few times, but he is right that it doesn't fit the rhythm)</p> <p>Brian: So how many syllables are here?</p> <p>....</p> <p>Kentaro: (counting syllables with his finger) 1-2-3-4-5 6-7-8</p> <p>Brian: right, 6-7-8. So 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8. So this is one short</p> <p>Kentaro: This is too short or? Or too long or?</p>
<i>Rhythm &amp; Stress</i>	<p>22. Brian: That's really nice. here, this mix of chance and hands. But when you sing 'spend the night together', the rhythm is not really natural.</p> <p>Kentaro: Oh OK.</p> <p>Brian: Yeah, it just doesn't seem to match the rhythm, quite, I mean you're going 'spend the night together' which is ok but the stress in 'spend the night, spend the night together' you want the rhythm on 'spend' and 'night' (I write dots above the places where the stress should be placed: 'SPEND', 'NIGHT', 'toGETher)</p> <p>Kentaro: Yeah.</p> <p>Brian: (singing with suggested stress) SPEND the NIGHT toGETher</p>

If you have ever asked your students to write haiku in English, then you will understand how difficult most Japanese find it to count English syllables (quote 21). While many L1 songwriters count syllables only unconsciously, it is an important aspect of matching words to music and causes considerable difficulty for L2 songwriters. Quote 22 is an example of the teacher helping the songwriter to sing with more natural stress. Japanese generally places equal stress on all syllables in a sentence. In high school, students learn how to place stress on specific syllables in English words, but it continues to be difficult for most people. Stress is particularly important in songs since the primary stress of the lyrics in English generally falls on the primary beats of the rhythm (not true for many other languages including Japanese). A mismatch between word stress and rhythm can make the song sound very unnatural.

### Songwriting problems

Some difficulties which arise for the L2 songwriter are very specific to songwriting and do not cause a problem in other areas of language use. Some of these are shown in Table 7.

The importance of all items in Table 7 is open to debate. Rhyme (quote 23), suitable title (25), suitable song structure (24), and level of abstractness of lyric (27) are all absent from many modern English songs. However, as with most modes of creation, it is probably best for the songwriter to be aware of the rules before she breaks them.

Table 7. Songwriting problems

<i>Rhyme</i>	<p>23. Brian: So when you wrote this, did you think about rhyme?</p> <p>Kentaro: No, no, just nothing.</p> <p>Brian: Because it's interesting. In English songs, rhyme is very important.</p> <p>Kentaro: Oh.</p> <p>Brian: I mean, for example, the word 'chance'. Do you know any words that rhyme with 'chance'?</p> <p>Kentaro: chance, chance, chance (thinking) ... only the last, like here for example (pointing at the end of the word), like 'vacance' for example?</p>
<i>Song structure</i>	<p>24. Kentaro: Melody is 95% fixed ... beginning (intro) and the middle and prologue ...</p> <p>Brian: Yeah, we'd usually just call that the ending. In English, we usually have ... a song is usually something like verse ... chorus</p> <p>Kentaro: verse is what?</p> <p>Brian: Well, for example you know the song <i>Let It Be</i>? And <i>Let it Be</i> is just like that. Sometimes we have a bridge here. So the structure is a little different to Japanese songs.</p> <p>Kentaro: In Japanese songs, <i>sabi</i> is the most important part of the song.</p>

<i>Unsuitable title</i>	<p>25. Brian: The grammar is ok now, but it sounds, what is the title of this song?</p> <p>Kentaro: Oh, so, Forever Road</p> <p>Brian: Forever road, em, now Forever Road doesn't sound like the title ... If somebody is listening and they don't know the title, what will they think the title is?</p> <p>Kentaro: (thinks for a few moments) maybe, maybe, well happiness or something like that</p> <p>Brian: well usually, in Japanese songs, often the title is not in the song.</p> <p>Kentaro: aaah (looks like he might disagree)</p> <p>Brian: But in English songs, in English songs, almost always, the title is in the song.</p> <p>Kentaro: Hmm (thinking for a few moments). Maybe 'Stay With Me' or something</p>
<i>Level of abstractness of lyric</i>	<p>26. Brian: Happy birthday, 'ring for you'. Ah, is that an engagement ring?</p> <p>Kentaro: Yeah, some situation, if the audience feel that, I guess it's up to you because it's up to the audience.</p>
<i>Lack of technical knowledge</i>	<p>27. Brian: What is difficult about writing a song?</p> <p>Kentaro: I don't know how to write music, I mean write a score. So image, music melody image come but to record to the paper is in my case very difficult. Just a tape recorder is ok, but I like to make score. So that is difficult because I don't have knowledge of ... writing ... compose</p>

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have shown particular difficulties that arise for L2 songwriters by selecting comments from the interviews and extracts from the songwriting workshops. Data from interviews and songwriting workshops has been presented to show how difficulties arise through a range of factors including linguistic ability, identity, translation, matching words and music, and songwriting skills. This is not intended to be a complete list of difficulties, nor have I made an attempt to analyze the relative frequency of these difficulties in the data or which ones are critical. While the personal nature of songwriting probably precludes the exact specification of the critical difficulties, future work will probe further into the criticality of particular difficulties within a number of case studies of songwriters. It is hoped that this will eventually lead to increased understanding of not just songwriting, but also in the increasingly important wider field of L2 creativity.

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