

# Using poems and short stories in writing classes

Peter Wells

Kansai Gaidai University

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This workshop demonstrated some ways of using poetry writing and story writing in EFL classes. The three main types of writing discussed were: short poems in free verse, haikus, and 50-word stories. In general, the argument for using literature in EFL classes is that the activity is more interesting than routine communicative tasks. Students become emotionally involved in what they are writing, which makes the process more meaningful. Also, there is a sense of achievement in producing a work of literature even while still at an elementary level. In the case of haikus and 50-word stories, the limitations imposed by the rules of the genres oblige the students to focus closely on formal features of language, such as pronunciation and grammar. Finally, the tasks are short enough to be done in collaboration, in the course of a single lesson, and they can be shared with fellow students. Students have the opportunity to use various presentational skills in these activities.

このワークショップでは、EFLのクラスにおいて、詩および物語の創作活動をどのように使うか、その方法を例示した。主に取り上げた三つの創作形式は、短い自由詩、俳句、そして、50語からなる物語である。一般に、EFLのクラスで文学を用いることの利点は、きまりきったコミュニケーション・タスクに比べ、より興味を喚起することにあるとされる。受講生が自分の書いている内容に情情的に入り込むため、書くという行為そのものがより意味深いものとなる。また、たとえ初級レベルではあっても、文学を創作することに達成感を覚える。また、俳句と50語の物語の場合には、その創作様式上の制限のため、受講生は音声と文法といった言語の形式的な面に大いに注意を払う必要にせまられる。最後に、このクラス活動は短い時間で行うので、ひとつの授業時間内に共同作業として行い、それをクラス全体で使うこともできる。また、これらの活動は、受講生がいろいろな発表の仕方を実際に使う機会ともなりうる。

**T**HE USE of literary activities in EFL lessons may owe its origin to the fact that the early EFL teachers were mainly EL1 teachers with a first degree in English literature. This is borne out by the heavy use of simplified classics in the early stages of Extensive Reading. As the art of teaching English overseas developed, giants of the profession gave their support to the inclusion of some literary activities in EFL. Widdowson (1976), for example, argued powerfully for the recognition of the value of literary studies as an aid to language development. In 1983 in a conversation with the editor of the *ELTJ*, he said,

[W]ith literary discourse the actual *procedures for making sense* [italics added] are much more in evidence [i.e., than with normal, everyday discourse]. You've got to employ interpretative procedures in a way which isn't required of you in the normal reading pro-



cess. If you want to develop these procedural abilities to make sense of discourse, then literature has a place. (p. 31)

Widdowson's focus tended to be on using literature to improve reading, rather than writing, as can be seen from the emphasis on the "procedures for making sense." In Collie and Slater (1987), by contrast, literary texts are used as the stimuli for various language activities, some of them literary.

One argument for the use of literature in EFL learning is that emotional involvement is very effective in activating memory. Stevick (1976) cites experiments in which it is shown that pairs consisting of nonsense words plus known words are better remembered, particularly after a lapse of time, if the known word is "emotionally loaded." Words such as *money*, *rape*, or *slut*, which caused measurable physical arousal, fell into this category, whereas words such as *white*, *pond*, or *berry* did not (p. 39). As Widdowson went on to say in his conversation with the editor of the ELTJ,

It's not easy to see how learners can get interested in and therefore motivated by a dialogue about buying stamps at a post office. There is no plot, there is no mystery, there is no character; everything proceeds as if communication never created a problem. There's no misunderstanding, there's no possibility of any kind of interaction. What happens is that the learners simply mouth the sentences of their parts, and you don't actually get them interested in what they are doing. (ibid, p. 34)

One of the leading figures in the use of creative writing in EFL classrooms for many years has been Alan Maley, who spoke at the 2010 JALT Conference, "Creativity: Think Outside the Box." In a pre-conference article in *The Language Teacher*, Maley wrote: "C[reative] W[riting] aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and discourse" (p. 5).

He also provided a useful list of fairly recent books on the topic (Maley, 2010). Tin, Manara, and Ragawati (2010) present an interesting analysis by Indonesian students of poems written by fellow students.

In Japan, where English is regarded as a foreign, rather than a second language, there seems to have been some hesitation about experimenting with creative writing; however, a search of *The Language Teacher* does throw up some interesting examples, such as Rivers (2007) and Brady (2008).

In this paper I intend to describe three activities which I have used successfully in Japan in EFL classes with university students who were non-English majors. They are: free verse, haikus, and 50-word stories.

### Free verse

Poetry has been variously defined, but a minimal definition of it is that it is a text written in "lines." In other words, unlike prose, the lines stop before the edge of the page is reached. Additionally, it is sometimes divided into sections which we call "verses" or "stanzas." The main purpose of this seems to be to announce the poetic nature of the text, and to invite the reader to focus closely on the words as words. The shortness of the lines foregrounds the content of the lines, and the shorter a line is, the more its content is emphasized. Attention is particularly drawn to the first and last words of a line, especially if the line break is surprising—i.e., comes in the middle of a sentence. This means that if a word is both the first and last word of a line (i.e., there is only one word in the line), such a word gains even more attention.

Verses have the same effect as lines, only more so. Starting a new verse strongly foregrounds the words before and after the break, and a verse with only one word gives extremely strong emphasis to that word.



Poetry surely must have a content which expresses some sort of emotion, even if it is a mild emotion, such as amusement, but apart from that there are no other rules that all poets obey. It is not necessary, for example, that poems have meter, or rhyme, or have stanzas of regular patterns or lengths, or start each line with a capital letter, or even contain figures of speech, such as metaphors.

Obviously a poem that consisted of nothing but one-word lines, or one-word verses, would be ineffective. The words the writer wants to emphasize should be foregrounded by this technique in contrast to the other words, and this requires careful thought about which are the most important words, and how most effectively to deploy line or verse breaks. This can be seen in the examples that are included in this article and the appendices.

## Method

The idea of using lines and verse breaks can be introduced by taking the well-known poem *This is just to say* by William Carlos Williams, and writing it as one continuous paragraph, like this:

This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast  
Forgive me they were delicious so sweet and so cold.

Then, ask the students to rewrite it as a poem with a title and three 4-line stanzas. The original was written thus:

### *This is just to say*

*I have eaten  
the plums  
that were in*

*the icebox*

*and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for breakfast*

*Forgive me  
They were delicious  
so sweet  
and so cold.*

Most students will come up with something like this, and you can show them how to make the poem arguably more effective by “stretching” it further, e.g.,

*Forgive me  
They were delicious*

*so sweet*

*and so*

*cold.*

After this exercise the teacher can move on to the next stage, which is to ask students to write a short sentence or two about something that makes them laugh, or feel sad or happy. When they have done this, the teacher can then invite them to divide



their poem up, like Williams's, to make the important words stand out more. If they don't understand what to do, or can't think of anything to write, they can be given some examples. A collection of such poems written by Middle Eastern and Japanese students is found in Appendix 1.

This activity can be made more effective, motivating and enjoyable by asking students to work in pairs, to write their poem, with pictures and graphics, on a poster, and to present it to their fellow students at the end of the lesson. Japanese students work well together on this task, and enjoy using colored pens and drawing little pictures to enhance their poetry. It is suitable for school students and university students in their first year or two, especially if their level of English is not high.

## Haikus

The haiku is a three-line verse form, originating in Japan, in which there are 17 syllables: 5 in the first and third lines, and 7 in the second. It is not necessary to start each line with a capital letter. Titles are useful, because they mean the poem itself can be less explicit—you can get more value from your 17 syllables.

Due to the strict rules of the form, this is an activity for students at a higher level than the previous one. As with free verse, it is usually sufficient to give the students some examples of what you want. In Japan, it is possible to show them real haikus, downloaded from the internet. You can also find haikus written by Japanese poets and translated into English, though sometimes, due to the difficulties of translation, they do not obey the rules about numbers of syllables, as in the case of the following:

## Haikus by Japanese poets

### *The Dragonfly*

See! The dragonfly:  
His face is very nearly  
Only eye  
(Chisoku)

### *The Cuckoo's Song*

As the cuckoo flies,  
Its singing stretches out  
On the water lies.  
(Basho)

A further resource is to show the students haikus written by professional English-speaking poets, such as these:

## Haikus by English-speaking poets

### *The Mississippi River*

Under the low grey  
Winter skies water pushes  
Water on its way  
(Kenneth Dasuda)

### *Rain*

Gentle summer rain  
Scratch, scratch upon the window  
With its little stick  
(Colin Rowbotham)



Examples of haikus written by Middle Eastern students can be found in Appendix 2.

### Writing a haiku

In order to show students or conference participants what the process of writing a haiku is like, I sometimes go through an idealized description of the process, taking as my task: Writing a haiku about writing haikus.

#### Version 1

I like writing haikus because haikus are really cute. You can say a lot in just a few syllables. (26 syllables)

Comment: this is a very preliminary draft, which simply expresses an idea about haikus.

#### Version 2

Haikus are really cute. You can say a lot in just a few syllables. (18)

Comment: This version approaches the right number of syllables, but is very prosaic, and there is no sense of line division.

#### Version 3

Haikus are really cute. You can say lots in just a few syllables. (17)

Comment: This version has the right number of syllables, but is still rather gauche, with its use of “cute” and “lots.”

#### Version 4

Haikus are really (5) Cute you can say lots in just (7) A few syllables (5)

Comment: Here there is an attempt to divide the poem into lines, but it is unsuccessful. The feeble word “cute” is still being used.

#### Version 5

A few syllables (5) Can say many things (5) In a haiku (4)

Comment: Here the lines are beginning to take shape, and the poem is sounding more poetic, particularly now that “cute” has been abandoned. However, there are three spare syllables that could be used to say something more effective.

#### Version 6:

A few syllables

Say many beautiful things

In a fine haiku.

Comment: This version uses the emotive words “beautiful” and “fine,” and has a contrast between “few” and “many” which seems to express the essence of haikus.

Haikus are particularly helpful in teaching EFL because of the discipline involved. In addition to the fun and interest of expressing feeling in well-chosen words, there is a rule about their formation, and this rule involves syllable-counting. Many non-English speakers—and the Japanese are certainly no exception—have difficulty with English syllabication, mainly because of consonant clusters. You will find, for example, that students will count “clothes,” and even “liked,” as two syllables. There are also ways in which vital words can be saved by rewriting; this will be discussed below, under Short Stories.

As with free verse, the students can write their haikus in pairs or groups during the course of a single lesson, inscribe them tastefully on a poster, and share them with classmates.



## Short stories

The 50-word story is a recognized genre with its own history, websites and competitions. The rules are simple: each story must have exactly 50 words, not more or less. The words of the title, as with haikus, do not count, so you can use the title to sneak in a few vital extra words.

As with poems, 50-word stories are short enough that they can be written by groups of two or three, can be completed in a single lesson, and can be shared with the rest of the class by means of posters, OHP slides, overhead cameras, computers with projectors, class magazines, etc.

Writing skills can be developed at various levels by using short stories. At the lowest level, they can expose grammatical weaknesses, such as omission of articles. It is quite common to find that a Japanese student has written a story in 50 words, but has omitted a necessary determiner in several places. This means that they have to delete the equivalent number of content words, and brings home to them, hopefully, the importance of articles, or determiners, in English.

At a slightly higher level, writing a short story involves editing and re-editing, and can help to overcome the typical student's inability to contemplate changing what has been written. You will find students gazing in paralysis at a text of 51 words containing the phrase "When I was a high school student," without being able to see that they could easily change it to "When I was in high school." In 50-word stories there is a case for replacing phrasal verbs with single-word equivalents, such as "pick up" with "collect."

I use two methods to introduce 50-word stories, depending on the level of the class. The first is a sheet containing fairly simple stories written by ESL students. The second contains more sophisticated stories written by native English speakers. They can be found in Appendix 3.

With elementary students it is usually difficult to produce short stories with literary merit, but the challenge of writing within the required constraints is still there. If the students are writing on a computer they can use the word-counting feature to check their word count; if they are in a classroom the teacher should provide a plentiful supply of sheets of paper with a 10 x 5 grid on which to write their successive drafts.

Here is a stage-by-stage account of how an elementary student managed, with help, to produce a simple, complete narrative with exactly 50 words:

### Stage 1:

When I was high school student I joined volleyball club. But I was not good player. So I did not play for team. So one day the bus was late and good player did not come. So my coach said you must play. And I helped my team to win.

Comment: This has 50 words, but many technical flaws.

### Stage 2:

When I was high school student I joined volleyball club but I was not good player, so I did not play for team. One day good player did not come, so my coach said you must play. I helped my team to win. I was so proud and happy.

Comment: This has 50 words, but articles are missing.

### Stage 3:

When I was a high school student I joined the volleyball club but I was not a good player, so I did not play for the team. One day a good player did not come, so my coach said you must play. I helped my team to win. I was so proud and happy.

Comment: Articles have been put in, but the story now has 54 words!



### Stage 4:

At high school I joined the volleyball club but I was not a good player, so I did not play for the team. One day a good player did not come, so my coach said you must play. I helped my team to win. I was so proud and happy.

Comment: This version has 50 words, and is acceptable at this level.

### Conclusion

Poetry and short stories are effective in teaching English writing because they focus the students' attention on words and grammatical features in a motivating way. The language used is remembered because they express feelings, involve the imagination, and pose challenging problems of composition. They can be written in small groups of students (twos or threes), and the task can be completed in the space of a single lesson. Students can use graphic and other media skills to enhance presentations of their work, and the work they have done can be shared with classmates either in the same lesson or a later one. Finally, especially for elementary students, there is a sense of achievement in the fact that, although they are writing in a foreign language, they have still managed to write a real poem or story.

### Bio Data

**Peter Wells** is an Assistant Professor at Kansai Gaidai University. He has been involved in teacher training since 1978, and has worked in the UK, Africa, Singapore and the Middle East. In addition to Writing Development, he is currently interested in Discourse Analysis and Reading Fluency. <peter\_wells@hotmail.com>

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### Appendix I

#### Some free verse by Middle Eastern students (advanced)

#### Home

Each time  
I go away  
I think  
I'll never come back.  
That  
Steals my smiles  
And



Changes them to  
Sighs.

### *My Hobby*

Every afternoon  
I like to play football.

I'm not alone:  
The ball is for all

We kick it and run,  
Trying to score a goal.

Having a time of fun  
Till the setting of the sun.

### *Japanese students (pre-intermediate/intermediate)*

#### *Fireworks*

You are colorful  
And give me brightness

Your life is short  
But my memory will not  
Fade away

#### *Art*

Art has many  
Colors,

Shapes,  
Many emotions.

When I draw  
I feel  
pleasure  
and peace of mind.

Beautiful art  
Makes my heart  
More beautiful.

#### *You*

I'm glad to see you  
I'm happy to talk to you  
I'm happy everyday with you  
And  
I've fallen in love with you.  
But  
I can't tell this feeling to you.

#### *My Partner*

When I'm sad  
Or happy  
Or worried  
Or angry  
You always greet me  
With a smile.





Comments: As the accompanying picture revealed, the “partner” in the above poem was not a lover, but the writer’s pet dog! The preceding poem, however (*You*), was about romantic love. The following poems show that these young students—mainly second year non-English majors—were capable of humor and irony. The next poem, for example, is about cake:

### *Lovin’ You*

Since I met you  
For the first time

I was charmed by  
Your soft spongy texture  
Your beautiful white cream  
Your sweet and sour strawberry

Once I think of you  
My stomach can’t help seeking you.

Would you marry me?

### *My Sweet Heart*

You are so sweet  
Please stay with me!  
But you can’t.

Your name is

chocolate.

## Appendix 2

### *Haikus by intermediate students (Middle Eastern)*

#### *To My Mother*

Years have passed and yet  
You are still away from me.  
Mother, I miss you.

#### *The Chef*

My tasty sponge cake  
Full of chocolate, jam and cream  
Will be your dessert!

#### *My Friend*

He is a good man,  
Wise, clever, trusted and kind.  
He is my best friend.

#### *You*

This is just to say  
Life is gloomy without you.  
I want you near me.

#### *A Beautiful Woman*

Really beautiful!  
In a sweet, good-tempered face:  
Intelligent eyes.



## Appendix 3

### First worksheet (less advanced classes)

Here are some 50-word stories written by students. First, find the missing word in the first three stories.

#### The Journey

It had been years, maybe twenty or more. I could still remember those beautiful scenes, the breath of fresh air, the sweet familiar smell coming from the chimneys ...

“Where are you going, sir?” the driver asked, in a pleasant voice.

There was a long silence before I said,  
“.....”

#### Bird in a Cage

A little dove was put in a golden cage for no guilt of its own. It had been trying to get out of that cruel cage since its first day there. It had lost its feathers fighting with the cruel bars, but it kept trying until finally it tasted ... ..

#### The Best Friend

I sat alone inside a locked room without knowing what to do. I could feel the emptiness in the atmosphere of the room. I could not find anything interesting to entertain me except a ..... I took it and I began to read it. It was my best friend forever.

*The following stories have the wrong number of words. Rewrite them with exactly 50 words.*

#### Unexpected Death

A poor man sought shelter from rain in an empty coffin. Another man sat down beside it. The man inside the coffin put his hand out. The man outside the coffin died of shock when he saw the hand. So the man in the coffin was alive, but the man outside the coffin was dead. (55 words)

#### Little Sarah

She was very angry with her friends. They were all discussing something with each other. When she approached them, they changed the subject. She felt awful. She felt that they hated her. After deciding to leave them and join another group, she found out that they were preparing a party for her birthday. (53 words)

#### Greedy People

A rich wanderer travelled with his herd of goats. He met a man who invited him to spend that night in his house. The man and his wife thought of killing that traveler and stealing his treasure. The guest slept with their son, and they killed their boy instead. (49 words)

Comments: The original missing word in *The Journey* was “home,” and in *Bird in a Cage*, “freedom.” In *The Best Friend* the new friend was a book.

In the next two stories the question of which words to omit becomes quite subtle. (Bear in mind that the story cannot contain fewer than 50 words.) For example, in *Unexpected Death*, you could replace the words “the coffin” with “it” on every occurrence after the first, but the repetition of “it” sounds odd. Anyway, you still need to lose one more word. You could omit “when he saw the hand,” but that arguably makes the story less clear. And so on.



In *Greedy People*, there is a certain amount of obscurity, and an unused word. You could insert “unfortunately” before “the guest,” but in fact considerable rewriting is needed to make it clear what happened (and to eliminate the suggestion that the guest and the son were having an erotic relationship!)

Here is a possible version:

A thief invited a rich traveler to spend the night in his house. The house was so small that the traveler had to sleep with the thief’s son. The thief and his wife planned to kill the traveler and rob him. Unfortunately, in the darkness, they killed their son instead.

### ***A more advanced worksheet***

When using this sheet, you can omit a certain number of words from the end of each story, and invite the students to guess them.

#### ***Take me to ...***

The pilot’s first reaction was anger. Anger at airport security. Then fear—for his life. The hostess had calmly told him there was a hijacker on board. “Wh- what do they want?” he asked, unable to even sweat. “We want this plane,” she replied, with a gun at his head.

#### ***The ultimate technological advance***

A nation waited, speechless. Press were informed of new developments. “Our secret computer links with Moscow have detected a major nuclear offensive against us. We had no option but launch warheads into Russian territory. Four minutes and counting. Prepare for war.”

A hungry soviet mouse continued chewing into the wires.

#### ***Pretty high-powered stuff...***

The assistant was explaining. “With this microscope, we can look ten thousand times closer than ever before. Inside the nucleus of a single atom,” he told the reporters. The eminent professor—privileged first observer—cried out, aghast.

“What did you see?” they asked.

“...a-another universe,” he stammered, “...just like ours.”

#### ***Work shy***

“Time for school, dear.”

“I don’t want to go to school, Mummy.”

“Why not?”

“The teachers are nasty to me.”

“Well, perhaps you were naughty.”

“And the kids hate me and say nasty things to me.”

“But you must go, dear.”

“Why? Just give me one reason.”

“You’re the principal.”

#### ***Time travel***

The inventor entered the time machine. Travelled back into the past. Accidentally killed his grandfather. Was not born. Did not invent a time machine. Did not travel into the past. Did not kill his grandfather. Was born. Invented a time machine. Entered the time machine. Travelled back into the past ...

