

Writing Outside the Box: Creativity in the EFL Classroom

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Japanese high school students rarely have the opportunity to express themselves through creative writing in their native language. There are even fewer opportunities for them to write creatively in English, and opportunities to engage in writing English poetry are almost unheard of. This paper discusses the results of a creative writing lesson that employed short poetry and prose writing tasks. The class consisted of 19 high English ability, 3rd-year students in an all-girls private high school and focused on facilitating individual expression. Data collected from pre- and postlesson questionnaires suggest that second language learners can benefit from creative writing activities. Results from this lesson may provide impetus for language educators to consider incorporating creativity into their classrooms.

日本の高校生は母語である日本語ですら自分の意見を文章で表現する機会がほとんどない。まして英語での創作、特に詩を書く活動は皆無であると言っても過言ではない。この研究では、英語で詩や散文を書く活動について議論する。授業は女子高校3年生の比較的英語力のある生徒を対象とし、自己表現に重点を置いた。授業の前後で得た学習者を対象とするアンケートデータによると、英語での創作活動が有益で、自己表現による創作活動導入を奨励する結果となっている。

Japanese secondary school students are, in my view, an unfortunate lot. During their first 6 years of formal education in primary school, children typically experience a rather relaxed, academically integrated, and low-pressure educational environment that focuses on educating both the heart and mind (Tsuneyoshi, 2014). Following this, they enter a 3-year span of junior high school that presents a rather different context. This middle school experience is characterized by widespread standardized testing typically administered by for-profit corporate entities (Edwards, 2006) and a government-man-

dated curriculum coupled with private-sector published textbooks (MOFA, 2014). At a young age, learners typically begin to feel that there is a lot of pressure being placed on them because of the high-stakes entrance exams at the high school and university levels that can greatly impact their futures (Wray, 1999). Because of this, much of the focus in both junior and senior high school centers on exam preparation, and there is little opportunity for students to develop their individuality.

Foreign language education in Japan is almost exclusively equated with *English* education (Aspinall, 2010). It has been dominated by a rather unique teaching methodology called *yakudoku*—a hybrid form of grammar-translation (see Hino, 1988 for a detailed discussion of this method)—since the introduction of English as a school subject in the 1950s (Gorsuch 1998). Nishino and Watanabe (2008) stated that “Despite MEXT’s (Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) intention to develop the nation’s practical English communication abilities, communicative approaches to teaching English are not prevalent in Japanese secondary schools” (p. 134). Thus, although Japanese high school graduates possess some degree of translation and grammatical ability, their communicative and expressive skills are frequently lacking.

In my teaching role at an all-girls private school, I conducted lessons entirely in English for students in our intensive English course. As part of their program, students homestay for nearly a year in English-speaking countries. Therefore, all of the students in the class described in this article had spent at least 11 months studying in an ESL immersion environment.

I elected to conduct a creative writing lesson in December 2014 with the senior (final-year) high school students in the class we called Multimedia English, which was essentially an academic writing, university preparatory course. Throughout the year, these high-ability students had composed and revised a series of essays of various genres: descriptive, comparison and contrast, narrative, and procedure. However, they had had very few opportunities to engage in the types of writing exercises that would have given them the freedom necessary to express themselves creatively. My objective in designing

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the lesson discussed in this paper was to provide a stimulating series of activities that allowed students to put their extensive linguistic knowledge to use, therefore transitioning from theoretical knowledge to practical application. The purpose of this lesson—intended as a capstone of the students’ 6 years of intensive English study—was to provide an opportunity for students to engage in creative and personal expression. I believed that by having students express their individual thoughts and emotions, I would achieve one of the educational objectives stated by the Ministry of Education—namely, to develop students’ communicative and expressive abilities. (MEXT, 2009)

Lesson Design

The lesson described in this paper was based almost entirely on the experience and information I gained at a creative writing workshop conducted by Alan Maley in November 2014 and hosted by the Sendai chapter of the Japan Association for Language Teaching. From the many writing activities Maley presented, I selected four activities of varying degrees of difficulty that I believed would stimulate and challenge these particular students to write, but that were not beyond the ability level of the majority of the students so as to ensure that they would be able to successfully complete the tasks.

After carefully considering the lesson structure, I decided to make use of a number of resources including brief pre- and postlesson online questionnaires, PowerPoint slides to carefully explain and demonstrate the activities, printed worksheets for each of the four activities, and a homework assignment that required students to type out the written work that they had created during class in Microsoft Word documents to be emailed to me as attachments prior to the following lesson. Despite being part of a *writing* class, the lesson design called for the students to make use of all four language skills: reading the PowerPoint slides and worksheets, listening to their instructor and classmates, speaking with classmates and the teacher about what they had produced, and, of course, writing both poetry and prose.

This single 90-minute lesson differed significantly from the other lessons given throughout the year. In order to provide an environment and structure in which the students felt free of the usual pressure of being evaluated, they were informed of this special lesson the week prior to the lesson and were told that their compositions in the lesson would not be graded in any manner and that their participation was all that was required. In this way, it was my hope to encourage them to express themselves freely rather than have them simply write for the purpose of earning a grade. I hoped to break down some of the typical teacher-student hierarchical dynamic common in the Japanese classroom and share a literary experience with these soon-to-be adults.

Methodology

Prelesson Questionnaire

Prior to the commencement of the lesson, I used a questionnaire written in English to gather information on students’ past creative writing experiences in both their L1 (Japanese) and their L2 (English). In addition, I sought to measure the students’ affinity for creative writing and their expectations about the coming lesson. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire the students had only been told that they would be participating in a creative writing workshop in which they would be writing poetry and prose. Table 1 summarizes the questionnaire items.

Table 1. Summary of Prelesson Questionnaire Items

Item	Question	Response Type
1	Have you ever done creative writing in your first language?	Yes/ No
2	How much do you like reading creative texts such as stories and poetry?	Likert 5-point
3	Have you ever done creative writing in English?	Yes/ No
4	Do you think you will enjoy creative writing in today’s class?	Likert 5-point

Lesson Activities

The specific activities included in the lesson were (a) Hello/Goodbye, (b) Cinquain poem, (c) Metaphor poem, and (d) Word array.

The first Hello/Goodbye activity was intended as a relatively easy warm-up that all students could successfully complete without much effort. Very simply, students were asked to select two related concepts and contrast them in a very short two-line poem. Students were required to begin the first line with “Hello,” and the second with, “Goodbye,” and were provided the example composition, “Hello sunshine, Goodbye rain.”

The second activity, the Cinquain poem, challenged students to compose a five-line poem with precisely two, four, six, eight, and two syllables, respectively. The only additional requirement was that the first and final lines be related in some way—though the way they were related was left to the discretion of the students themselves. This activity was intended to be much more cognitively taxing than the other three, and I expected to spend time, especially with the class members with lower level proficiency, giving them additional guidance and support.

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I anticipated that the third activity, a metaphor poem, would challenge the students in a different way than the two previous activities by having students stretch their language skills to the limits of their potential and create conceptual connections where typically they would expect none. This was to be realized through a task that required the students to combine two seemingly unrelated items in a single metaphor. In the first part of the activity, students were asked to create a metaphor by combining, from two lists projected on the classroom screen, an abstract noun such as *hope, life, marriage, love, anger, beauty, or happiness*, and a common item such as *a spoon, a knife, an egg, a window, or a mirror*. In the second part of this activity, students were asked to explain their metaphor using one or two short lines of text.

The final activity was designed to provide students with the opportunity to explore and discover language use at whatever level they were able. Students were given a list of 28 randomly ordered words and asked to use them to form as many sentences as they could. The words were taken from a single sentence in a book, something that I would share with students at the end of the lesson. Ultimately, I sought to expose these language users and learners to literature written by someone with whom they might be able to relate, Banana Yoshimoto, a contemporary female Japanese writer, but which depicted a situation and made use of language that would not typically find its way into a Japanese secondary school classroom.

In designing this 100-minute lesson, one concern that came to mind was the time students would take to complete these four activities. Given that this was my first time attempting these activities, I was cautiously optimistic that there would be sufficient time.

Postlesson Questionnaire

The postlesson questionnaire consisted of nine items. I sought to capture as much detail as possible about the students' experiences and attitudes in relation to the lesson. Because I wanted the students to accurately describe the day before their memories faded, students were required to respond to the questionnaire within 24 hours after the end of the class. Table 2 summarizes the questionnaire items.

Table 2. Summary of Postlesson Questionnaire Items

Item	Question	Response Type
1	How much did you enjoy today's class?	Likert 5-point
2	What did you learn in today's class?	Open-ended
3	How much did the class meet your expectations?	Likert 5-point
4 & 5	Which was your favorite activity? Why?	Multiple choice + open
6 & 7	Which was your least favorite activity? Why?	Multiple choice + open
8	Do you have any specific comments on the activities above?	Open-ended
9	Do you have any general comments or feedback on today's class?	Open-ended

Results

Prelesson Questionnaire

Responses from the first item indicated that about half of the 19 students had engaged in creative writing in Japanese. The second item asked, "How much do you like reading creative texts such as stories and poetry?" and provided a Likert scale range of options from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Responses for this question averaged 3.2, with seven students choosing the neutral option (3), which seems to indicate a slightly favorable disposition towards the genres covered by the activities that the students would do in the class. However, the third item asked students, "Have you ever done creative writing in English?" to which only three responded affirmatively; one of whom, interestingly, had not done any creative writing in her L1. The final questionnaire item asked, "Do you think you will enjoy creative writing in today's class?" This question was also graded using a Likert scale with response options identical to item two. Surprisingly, not a single student anticipated enjoying the class very much (option 5 on the scale) and only a single student selected option 4. With eight selecting option 3, and an average of only 2.4, it is clear that students did not think that they were going to enjoy the class.

Lesson Activities

The students seemed generally receptive to the unusual class format, but it was obvious from the very first activity that, although I had considered the abilities of the lowest level

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student in the class, some students were not going to make much effort or make efficient use of the limited class time. Hoping that a more relaxed atmosphere would be more conducive to creative writing I did not make use of a stopwatch or call for a specified time limit. However, in retrospect, it might have been helpful to set some time constraints for the students to adhere to.

The initial Hello/Goodbye activity was generally well received. I assume that this was because of the relative ease of the activity. Several students wrote multiple pairings, and with a little prodding, even the lowest proficiency students managed to compose at least two or three. It was obvious that my earlier concern about the possible slow pace of the class was valid. Student participation in the sharing time following writing was less active than I had hoped, and many were reluctant to read their compositions aloud. This, I believe, may have been due to the conditioning that Japanese students receive during their educational experience. Lee (2011) explains Japanese students' reluctance to engage in personal expression inside the classroom by stating that "little scope exists, if any, for exercising personal opinion and entering creative discussion within the classroom" (p. 3). Creative writing requires students to take risks, and my students may not have felt comfortable enough to reveal their work (thoughts, feelings, and errors) to their classmates. I felt somewhat disappointed that the compositions indicated that some students were not taking many risks. Many of the compositions emulated my own examples—again perhaps because of fear of risk taking. Several English language teaching (ELT) professionals in Japan have anecdotally shared similar experiences with me in discussion, suggesting that special attention ought to be paid to the sensitivities and reluctance of Japanese learners to engage in self-expression when considering the use of similar activities. The following are examples of the work produced in Activity 1:

Hello Starbucks, Goodbye money

Hello mistakes, Goodbye eraser

Hello pollution, Goodbye our earth

Hello rainbow, Goodbye rain

Activity 2, as I suspected, proved to be the most challenging for students. This activity required a good deal of independent thinking as I did not provide any guidance in the way of subject matter. In addition, lacking a clear understanding of English syllabic structure—a common problem for Japanese learners of English—some students struggled with adhering to the prescribed format. This activity did elicit some very creative

and expressive results, but I will most certainly spend time focusing on syllable recognition before attempting this again. During this activity, the students displayed a little more comfort and confidence in taking risks, though grammatical errors were abundant in their work. I advised students at the beginning of class to focus on meaning and not be overly concerned with grammar and spelling. I expected that, as students completed their homework assignments, they would discover some of their errors, and I would receive somewhat edited forms of many of the compositions, which was, in fact, the case. The following are two examples of student-generated writing that were submitted in class, formatted here to replicate the worksheets students used in Activity 2:

My school

Only girls' school

Excessively strict rules

I cannot wait to be freedom

Amen

Driving

The road to school

But with someone different

You would make my day so special

Dreaming

Activity 3, the Metaphor Poem, was executed after the mid-class break. Students appeared to enjoy this activity, and the class atmosphere seemed to relax noticeably. This may have been because students had a clearer understanding of what was expected of them, as well as the low-pressure approach I was taking as a writing facilitator, as opposed to my usual role as teacher, throughout the entire lesson. Many students appeared to enjoy the first part of the activity, though a few struggled to find logic in the pairings, despite my insistence that the pairings did not need to have any apparent connection. The second part of the activity challenged students to make connections between one of their three pairings, and it was this high-level cognitive task that several students noticeably struggled to complete. The following three examples of student-generated metaphor poems are typical of the more successful compositions from Activity 3:

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*School is a window
It's just a passage point
Between child and adult
Happiness is a cup
You try hard to fill it up*

*Love is a knife
Sometimes danger
But sometimes use for protect*

The final Word Array activity was very well received. I believe this was due in part to the particular words I had chosen. This may have been the first time that the students were allowed to use words such as *gay* and *bar*—which were on the list and were very familiar to them from their real-life experiences overseas—in an academic setting, and the students seemed to react rather favorably. However, it was apparent that the cognitive demands of the class were taxing many of the students and causing mental fatigue. Many of them produced a limited number of simple sentences, despite the possibility of creating over 50 distinct sentences by combining the 20 words that they had been given. However, despite coming at the end of what was, for many of the students, a difficult and challenging class, some of the sentences that students read during the sharing activity were complex and very well thought out. Again, the poor grammatical construction was somewhat disappointing, but reflected the true level of their academic writing abilities. When I shared the original 20-word sentence that the words were taken from, many of the students reacted with surprise when they discovered that all 20 words were used in a single sentence. When I put that sentence in the context of the chapter opening from which it came, students seemed highly engaged and interested. The scrambled words for this activity came from the sentence, “He had spotted her on the street and liked what he saw; when he followed her he discovered that the place where she worked was a gay bar” (Yoshimoto, 1988, p. 45), which is not at all typical of the types of sentences found in Japanese high school English texts.

Postlesson Questionnaire

Two of the questionnaire items from the post-lesson questionnaire asked Likert-scale type questions that can be easily quantified. The first asked, “How much did you enjoy

today’s class?” to which not a single student selected option 1 *not at all* or option 2 *not so much*. Four students reported that they enjoyed the class *very much*, with the overall average of 3.9, which suggests that, for many of the 19 participants, it was a positive experience. The second scaled question asked, “How did the class meet your expectations?” and presented the options *much worse than I expected*, *worse than I expected*, *as I expected*, *better than I expected*, and *much better than I expected*. Eleven students selected *better than expected* and none chose *worse* or *much worse*, again indicating that they had a rather positive experience. Although only a single student indicated any expectation of a positive experience in the prelesson questionnaire, the postlesson data reveal that 15 of them actually enjoyed the class to some degree and the same number responded that the class was better than they had expected.

Two questions asked students to indicate which activities were their most and least favorite and solicited comments in follow-up questions as to why. Twelve students selected Hello/Goodbye as their favorite, with many indicating that it was also the easiest. The remaining seven responses were almost evenly distributed between the three remaining activities. In response to the least favorite activity the students were divided, with eight selecting Word Array, seven selecting Metaphor Poem, and four choosing Cinquain Poem. The comments explaining why were rather detailed, but students generally indicated the level of difficulty as the dominant factor in their decision.

The remaining three questionnaire items were open-ended questions asking, “What did you learn in today’s class?” “Do you have any specific comments on the activities above?” and “Do you have any general comments or feedback on today’s class?” Space does not allow for an expanded discussion of the qualitative responses to these open-ended questions, as well as the explanations for selecting their favorite and least favorite activities, but the comments in the Appendix provide an inspiring snapshot of a lesson that was very well received by the students. New avenues of language use and self-expression were revealed to these 19 girls, and based on the comments, I expect that at least some of them will explore further opportunities to write creatively in English.

Discussion

This brief paper covered the planning, creation, execution, and results of a creative writing lesson in a Japanese high school. Based on my professional experience, academic study, intuition, and familiarity with the students, I sought to design a creative secondary school capstone lesson that would give meaning to the 3 years of intensive English study these students have experienced during their high school course.

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I am aware that, because of the small group size, descriptive statistics may not be warranted and these results may not be generalizable. However, the usefulness of this exercise was certainly high in my particular teaching context because it successfully elicited student self-expression and exploration in a nonjudgmental environment. The participants in this class were able to make good use of their language knowledge while engaging in communicative and expressive activities.

Overall, I believe the objectives of the lesson were successfully met. Students were engaged in all of the activities and produced expressive, emotional, and revealing compositions. This was an experiment, is surely in need of improvement for use in the future, but was a very worthwhile exercise for both students and teacher. One particular change I would suggest to this lesson design would be a change in the order of the activities presented. Because of the level of complexity, I believe the Cinquain poem would be better suited to follow the less-complex metaphor poem, then followed by a final, fun activity such as the word array.

Conclusion

Creativity in the classroom is something I would encourage ELT practitioners to incorporate into their lessons. Of course, time constraints and students' level of proficiency must be considered when designing activities for a particular class, but I believe the results presented in this article ought to provide sufficient evidence that EFL learners are capable of, and will benefit from, engagement in creative self-expression in their L2. I also encourage the reader to look through the student comments provided in the Appendix for further evidence of the value of bringing creativity into your own classroom.

Bio Data

Cory J. Koby is currently an assistant professor at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University. Prior to this he taught for 7 years at a private secondary school in Sendai, Japan. His present research focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of Japanese secondary school teachers of English in light of recent curriculum changes. In addition, he is currently involved in the implementation of a 2-year extensive reading program that will provide opportunities for future research. <corykoby@gmail.com>

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Appendix

Postlesson Questionnaire Results

Question 2 results

What did you learn in today's class?

- Creative Writing - Metaphor
- I learned variety creative writing.
- We learned how to make creative writings in today's class.
- Making poem is difficult for me! But creative writing is fun.
- To have fun what I cannot learn in other memorizing studies. Everybody has a creative world in their minds.
- How to write a poem. What metaphor is
- some kinds of poems
- Interesting of creative languages
- I learned how to write poetry.
- I found to make poem in English is interesting. We can write everything I want. So I could write freely.
- I learned how to make cinquain poem.
- I learned how to create the poem in English.
- Metaphor
- A poem, or word game and such on.
- I learned how to express feelings and to write a poem in English.
- I learned a syllable for making poem. It was kind of different, but it was fun to listen which other one's.
- Formation of English style haiku
- I learned about joy of words. I most interested in activity 3: metaphor poem. Both words are different meaning, but we could connected them. It was interesting.
- Poem

Question 5 results

Why was that your favorite activity?

- It was enjoyable to think my own poem with 2, 4, 6, 8, and 2 syllables.
- I've never done this kind of exercise before, but it was fun to think about the connecting
- Cinquain Poem was my favorite because the more I think, the nicer it became. I could make
- It was using too much my brain.
- Simple English but deep meaning.
- It was interesting to connect two different words.
- Because it was simple and it had many variation in it.
- It was interesting.
- It was fun to think.
- It was easiest one.
- it is easier than any other activities.
- It was easiest one.
- It was very interesting for me.
- It was the easiest.
- I think it was easiest to me, and very interesting.

Question 7 results

Why didn't you like that activity?

- It was too hard. There's limited words and I couldn't find good words to match to a sentence.
- I don't feel board at all, but just I think I couldn't work well for the activity. I need to and want to learn more about it.
- Metaphor was my least favorite because I could not explain what I wanted to say well.
- The syllable was little bit difficult for me
- It doesn't make sense to me why we did this
- Although it was hard to make a complete sentence from the words in the table, I enjoyed the process.

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- Difficult
- It was hard for me.
- It was hard for me to think.
- It was difficult.
- It was difficult for me.
- It was difficult.
- I need a little more words.
- it was difficult, and I could not explain plainly my work.
- It was difficult for me.
- too difficult for me
- I couldn't make long sentences. just short one.
- too difficult for me

Question 8 results
Do you have any specific comments on the activities?

- Should explained more, and give more time to write it.
- I've done lots of activities that making sentence form wordlist. However, today's lesson one was very good topics and words choice, so It was enjoyable. Also I could learn about the book that you recommend.
- Hello/Goodbye activity seemed to be easy at first, but when it came to write down, my mind became completely blank. It was difficult for me.
- I enjoyed Cinquain Poem very much, but syllables were tricky. Because of that, it took time to make it.
- I thought Metaphor Poem was the most creative activity in today's class. Each of us had different ideas, so it was interesting to hear them.
- I also enjoyed Word Array, but I regret that I could not make all the words into one sentence.
- I enjoyed my classmates writing. I didnt know how creative they were. They were all good, especially Momoko's shirayuri poem.
- Creative writing was actually hard but I thought it was much more fun than writing an essay.

- I like to write hello and goodbye activity. My friends made very interesting poetry.
- I always learn English of grammar, words and so on at MME. Today, I learned different things.
- It was first time to make poem in English. It was pretty hard , but I learned again English are interesting.

Question 9 results
Do you have any general comments or feedback on today's class?

- I enjoy today's lesson.
- I was better than what I expected.
- Especially, I enjoyed activity 2 and 3, because I could think the poem on my own words. I also could talk to my partner and share my ideas.
- Activity 4 was too hard.
- I think it is very important to learn about creative writing. I really like to read Japanese poems and stories that are written in creative way, but I haven't have so much interest in English one because those seems much more complicated than Japanese one. However, I could know about the basic knowledge, so I want to try reading English poem. Also I'd like to learn more about it in lest of our classes. (but i want to watch classic movie too...) It was great class!!
- I really enjoyed today's class. I wanted to do more activities. Actually, I am not good at making creative or imaginative things in Japanese, but in English, I could make some great works and it was so fun! My friends also got some good ideas, so we could share each ideas. I think every classmates did well in the class. It was a nice experience for us. Thanks Mr. Koby for giving us such a great opportunity.
- It was much fun that I expected!
- I think we all learned something different that is never taught in reading or science or history classes but from your class today. I wanted to do more of this.
- The class was much more interesting than I expected.
- I like to read poetry, but it was very hard to make it.
- I have never tried like today's lesson. You know I sometimes make poems at Japanese class, but it was first time to make in English. It was good.
- Today's class was kind of fun for me, but it was hard, too.

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- I've realized how interesting poem is. I want to take this class again. This class is worth a take. I think so.
- Writing a poem is hard for me, because writing a poem in Japanese is also so hard. However, I am interested in English poem by this class, so I would like to try more to do creative writings.