

Reimagining the Role of Literature in Language Teaching

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Although students in Japan encounter literature in course books and must acquire some knowledge of literature for test-taking, their engagement with such texts is often low. However, creative writing—including haiku, fiction, and creative nonfiction—can create opportunities for students to explore their own interests, express themselves, and further develop their language skills. In addition, student engagement can be enhanced through the integration of non-linguistic modes and digital tools.

日本の学生は、教科書を通して文学作品に触れる機会はあるものの、試験のために文学知識を習得しなければならないため、作品そのものに対する関心はあまり高くない。しかし、俳句、フィクション、創作ノンフィクションを含むライティング活動は、学生自身の関心を高め、自分を表現し、言語スキルを上達させる機会を生み出すと同時に、デジタルツールと組み合わせることで、学習へのより積極的な取り組みが期待できると考えられている。本稿では、こうした創作活動によって実際にどのような学びが起きるのか、また、どのような学習効果が得られるのかを考察する。

To a certain extent, literature has long been a component of language teaching in Japan. Junior and senior high school course books often include poems, stories, or extracts of longer prose works, which are sometimes adapted for readability. However, as public education is often focused on test preparation, many students in Japan reach university with a limited experience of writing critical or personal responses to literary texts. This often results in a low interest in literature, with a sense that it is difficult and distant from students' lives (McIlroy & Kamata, 2025). This trend can be countered through exercises in creative writing, in which students are allowed to express their own interests, share life experiences, and explore their imaginations. Furthermore, student engagement can be enhanced through the use of non-linguistic resources such as photos, drawings, origami, or wordless picture books, and digital tools. Personal writing can be extended into speaking activities through peer feedback and sharing work in class. Focusing on four different literary genres—haiku, wordless picture books, digital fiction, and creative nonfiction—this paper explores various strategies for incorporating creative writing into the foreign language classroom.

Composing Haiku Through Evocative Voice Pedagogy

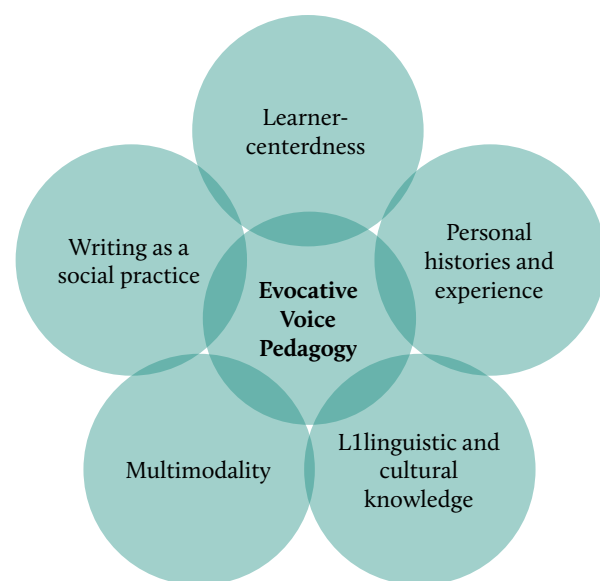
Many English as an additional language (EAL) learners struggle to incorporate their own voices into L2 texts and do not feel attached to their L2 writing (Chamcharatsri & Iida, 2022; Iida, 2025). This tendency is particularly salient among L2 writers who are trained to memorize lexical and grammatical items and produce grammatically correct sentences to achieve higher scores on standardized English tests (e.g., TOEIC or TOEFL)

or pass entrance exams. In such contexts, how can teachers help L2 writers construct and develop their own voices and become more engaged in L2 writing? How can literary writing help to evoke their own voices? Focusing on *haiku* as a literary genre, this section discusses a new theoretical approach to L2 creative writing, *evocative voice pedagogy*, and explores the value and potential of composing haiku in the target language.

Theorizing Evocative Voice Pedagogy

Evocative voice pedagogy is an approach to L2 creative writing. It is defined as a methodology “to empower L2 writers through finding and developing their identifiable voices in the context of poetry writing” (Iida, 2025, p. 21). It allows L2 writers to construct and negotiate meaning through the target language in a meaningful context where they reflected on their significant life memories in the L2 learning process. According to Iida (2025), evocative voice pedagogy is grounded in five key principles (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Key Principles of Evocative Voice Pedagogy

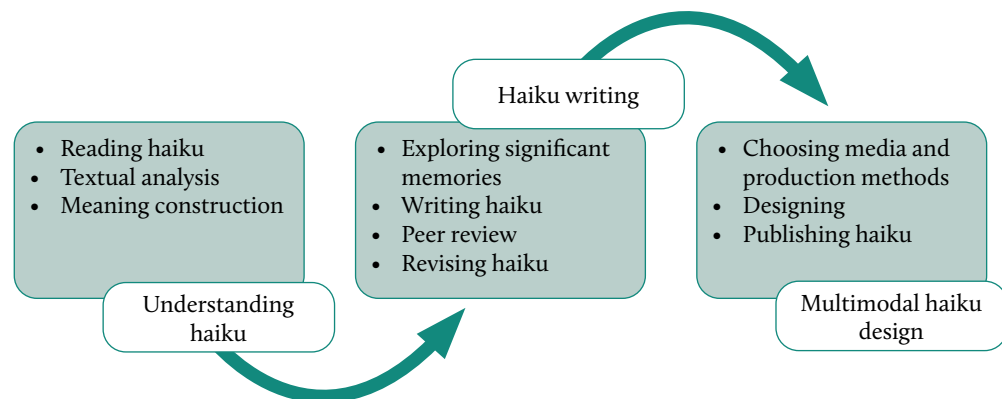


First, evocative voice pedagogy adopts a learner-centered approach that places individual students at the center of L2 learning. It positions individual learners as active agents who construct and negotiate meaning throughout the writing process. Second, this pedagogy emphasizes the use of students’ personal histories and experiences. Exploring and reflecting on their own histories and experiences in L2 writing makes language learning more personal and meaningful. Third, evocative voice pedagogy makes the maximum use of individual learners’ L1 linguistic and cultural knowledge. Unlike traditional L2 classrooms where students were prohibited from using their L1s, it values what each student already possesses and brings to the classroom and allows them to use all their available resources in their L2 writing. Fourth, multimodality is also a key principle for the pedagogy. Because meaning is often constructed through more than one mode, incorporating students’ non-linguistic resources into their L2 texts helps to construct and express their voices in the target language. Finally, writing as a social practice is fundamental to evocative voice pedagogy. Writing is a contextually situated activity (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2023; Hanauer, 2012) and the core objective of L2 writing is to develop written communication skills. It is, therefore, crucial for L2 writers to develop audience awareness and learn how to express their voices in a way that is appropriately conveyed to specific readers. Evocative voice pedagogy can be applied to any creative writing genre. The next section focuses on the task of composing haiku in English and illustrates how L2 writers’ voices are evoked, constructed, and expressed through this pedagogy.

Practicing Evocative Voice Pedagogy

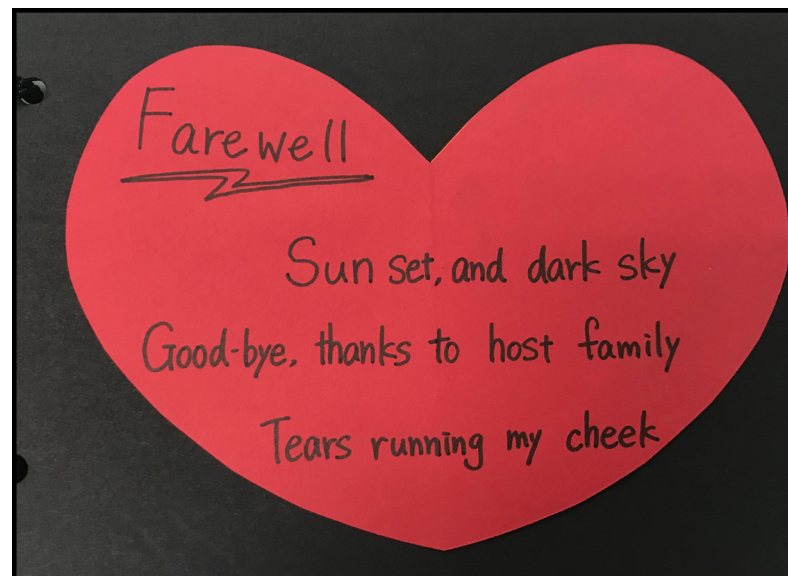
Teaching haiku writing through evocative voice pedagogy consists of three stages: understanding haiku, writing haiku, and designing multimodal haiku (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Process of Teaching English-Language Haiku Writing



The first stage is to understand the basic concept of haiku. By reading some English-language haiku written by EAL learners, students discuss structural rules (e.g., 5-7-5 syllables, a seasonal reference, and a cutting word) and how each writer's voice is expressed in the text. The second stage involves drafting and revising haiku. At this stage, students first make a list of significant memories in their lives, explore each memory, and free write about it. Then, they draft a haiku based on their freewriting. Here, students are instructed not to worry too much about correct grammar and punctuation; instead, they are encouraged to incorporate their own emotional voices in response to these memories. After finishing their first drafts, students participate in a peer-review activity, read each other's poems, provide feedback, and revise their poems. The final stage is designing multimodal haiku. This involves using non-linguistic modes (e.g., photos, drawings, or origami works), deciding on production methods, and designing and publishing their haiku. Here, students integrate one or two of these modes with their revised haiku to express themselves more effectively. For this activity, they are instructed to treat these modes not as a mere supplement but as an important means of articulating their own voices. Figure 3 illustrates a multimodal haiku produced by a Japanese EFL university student.

Figure 3
Multimodal Haiku Composition by a Japanese EFL Student (Iida, 2025, p. 64)



The haiku entitled *Farewell* describes a moment when the student parts from her host family in California. The first two lines, "Sun set, and dark sky" and "Good-bye, thanks to host family" depict a memorable scene where an orange sun is about to set in the dark sky and she greets her host family and expresses her deep appreciation. In this haiku, her voice is clearly articulated in the third line. The phrase, "Tears running my cheek" conveys her sadness at parting from her host family and returning to Japan. Although this three-line poem itself clearly expresses her voice and experience, a big red heart at the center of the black paper further emphasizes how emotional and special this moment was for the student. The red heart in this artistic work can be interpreted as symbolizing "love" and "affection," and this non-linguistic feature adds another layer of emotion to the poetic text. As shown here, using haiku in language learning can be creative and illustrative. This is just one of many ways literature can be a vital aid in language learning. The next section carries forth this objective by delving into the world of picture books.

Promoting Sustainable Development Goals through Wordless Picture Books

The use of picture books in English language teaching in Japan has been widely reported (Burri et al., 2022; Hasegawa et al., 2022; Hatae, 2012). Furthermore, numerous studies have illuminated the benefits of using wordless picture books in the ELT classroom (Arizpe & Ryan, 2018; Bland, 2015; Martinez-Alba & Cruzado-Guerrero, 2015). These benefits include increased motivation (Arizpe, 2013) and intercultural awareness (Burri et al., 2022). In addition, students can learn how to make meaning from illustrations (Arizpe, 2013); a close reading of illustrations can encourage discussions (Ramos & Ramos, 2011); and students can use these books to improve their writing (McAdam & Sinkie, 2013).

This research project was intended to introduce university students to the concept of wordless picture books, the range of topics covered in such books, and possible classroom applications for them. It was conducted over four 90-minute classroom periods in an elective Oral Communication class at a small educational university in Shikoku, thus most students intend to become teachers after graduation. The fifteen students involved were mostly in their 3rd year of study, and mostly English majors, with some graduate students and non-English majors participating. As instructors at this university are encouraged by the administration to incorporate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in their lectures, the books chosen for this unit suggest related themes.

The instructor began by sharing *Chalk* by Bill Thompson (2010), a story told solely in pictures with students, as one might read to young learners. Students gathered around the instructor and were involved in the story-telling process. For example, students were initially asked to name the three characters in the story. The instructor pointed to objects as they were mentioned in the story and sometimes asked students to name familiar objects.

Chalk features three children—a girl with Asian features, a Black girl, and a Caucasian boy—who go to a playground together on a rainy day and find a bag of colored magic chalk. Both male and female children are playing together as equals, which supports SDG 5 (gender equality), and their varied ethnicities might support SDG 10 (reduced inequalities).

After the reading, each student selected a book from an assortment brought to class by the instructor. Books included *Pool* by JiHyeon Lee (2015), in which two children, a boy and a girl, meet at a public pool and have a fantastical underwater adventure, which might lend itself to a discussion regarding SDG 14 (life below water). Swimming in a

pool can also lead to SDG 3 (good health and well-being). Another title, *Tuesday* by David Wiesner (1991), involves frogs which levitate from a pond and begin flying around town on lily pads. Although a fantasy, this story could be used to jumpstart a discussion on aberrations in animal behavior due to climate change or loss of habitat, which relates to SDG 13 (climate action). The illustrations could also engender consideration of SDG 14 (life below water) and SDG 15 (life on land).

After choosing a book, students were given time to write the story and think about how to tell it. They then practiced telling the story in small groups. In the following two class periods, each student shared their story with the entire class. Students gave each other feedback anonymously through the Moodle course management platform and suggested further classroom activities that might be conducted in relation to the picture books. Some suggestions for the latter were:

“It might be fun to use this book for a story relay, where everyone takes turns adding one sentence at a time. It challenges their quick thinking and imagination.”

“I think we can do some quiz with wordless picture books.”

“I think it would be interesting to do a play in a group using a wordless book. I think it would be good to come up with narration and lines in a group and then perform the play in front of everyone.”

“I think I can come up with and present the continuation of each picture book. I think I can create a game to see how the characters change from page to page.”

Students were also invited to reflect upon their own performances. For example, one student wrote, “I thought this activity is so fun! I was excited I was able to hear a lot of people’s stories. In addition, I also felt that I could improve my English.”

Although the students did not explicitly connect the picture books to the SDGs, through their storytelling, they demonstrated increased motivation, the ability to make meaning from illustrations, and intercultural awareness. Additionally, they managed to use the illustrations as prompts for writing stories. Many had no previous awareness of wordless picture books. Hopefully, they will find ways to integrate them into their future classrooms.

In addition to more traditional print materials such as picture books, instructors and students now have access to digital tools which may enhance language learning. The following section explicates a creative writing activity based on digital texts.

Digital Literature and Creative Writing

A substantial body of research has examined the application and implications of digital tools and content in facilitating literary engagement within foreign language learning environments (Heckman, 2021; Rettberg, 2020; Skains, 2019). And, while Japanese research on digital media, digital texts, and digital reading and writing has been reported (Hayakawa 2020; Yasuaki 2020), research addressing Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) setting remains limited. The study reported herein extends an earlier investigation into the use of born-digital (i.e., created and viewed in digital realms) Japanese literature in JFL learning (Richings, 2027, forthcoming) and offers a timely means of addressing this gap.

More specifically, this section introduces a complementary approach that instructors can adopt to foster engagement and creative expression in JFL. This approach involves using born-digital literary texts rich in symbolic meaning and imagery by guiding students to explore how symbolic representation conveys emotional depth and artistic meaning and by encouraging them to reflect critically on contemporary issues through storytelling that demonstrates nuanced inferential thinking. These two dimensions respectively aim to develop empathic and aesthetic awareness, and foster interpretive and discursive competence. Empathic and aesthetic awareness involves emotionally engaging with characters and appreciating the stylistic and symbolic qualities of a text, while interpretive and discursive competence entails inferring meaning, understanding narrative significance, and situating the text within its cultural and discursive context (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019). Applied in an elective JFL undergraduate class for students with high-intermediate to advanced Japanese language skills (CEFR B2-C1), this second approach similarly led to positive outcomes, with students actively engaging and producing creative work that demonstrated its effectiveness. For reasons of space, the next section gives a summary of the implementation. For a more detailed discussion of the rationale and criteria, see (Richings, 2027, forthcoming).

To meet the objectives outlined above, two texts (one for each semester)—*Gainen no tempura* [Tempura of Concepts] and *AI kara anata he* [From AI to You] (Murasaki, 2023a, 2023b)—were selected from the digital writing platform *Shōsetsuka ni narō* [Becoming a novelist] (2024), one of the most visited sites for online literature and digital writing. Categorized respectively as surrealism and human drama, both texts are fictional short stories requiring respectively five to twenty-five minutes of reading and comprising approximately 3,000 to 12,000 kanji. These texts were recognized as exemplary content for promoting emphatic and aesthetic awareness, as well as interpretive and discursive competence, while providing students with ample opportunities to express personal interpretations and emotional engagement.

The procedure was similar across both semesters, differing only in the text used and the assignment prompts. For example, in Semester 1, the task sheet included questions aimed at enhancing comprehension of the symbolism in the text, encouraging emotional engagement with characters and fostering appreciating for the aesthetic qualities of the text. In Semester 2, the questions were designed to focus on interpretive and discursive skills, with particular attention to developing students' inferring skills by guiding them to derive implicit meaning and engage critically with the text. These competences, as described by Alter and Ratheiser (2019), encompass the ability to analyze literary elements, appreciate narrative techniques, and situate texts within broader cultural and discursive contexts.

To systematically guide the students toward the creative writing component, the texts were first read aloud with the whole class, and supplementary explanations were provided regarding linguistic and cultural elements. Following the readings, students were instructed to engage in a creative writing activity tailored to each semester, with a slight increase in difficulty. In Semester 1, students were asked to rewrite the protagonist's outcome by drawing on the "tempura concepts" in the story or by introducing new concepts, with a particular focus on expressing the character's emotions and incorporating symbolism. In Semester 2, students were asked to either create a revised ending or an entirely new original story that emphasized character dynamics (e.g., AI versus human) and used inference to add depth.

As the implementation revealed, the students produced creative work that reflected the objectives of the study and effectively responded to the task instructions by using symbolic concepts as emotional and narrative anchors, and by incorporating inferential strategies to enrich their storytelling. Their engagement culminated in creative outputs that demonstrated not only the development of literary comprehension but also the deliberate use of ambiguity and inferencing to foreground the aesthetic qualities in their creations.

Extending this discussion, the next section turns to non-fiction creative writing as another literature-informed approach to language learning.

Writing About Our Lives: Student Perceptions of a Creative Nonfiction Component

There is a dearth of creative writing programs in Japanese universities (Madeen & Sugimoto, 2019). However, creative writing can be impactful for EFL students (Maloney, 2019). In this paper, an elective creative writing course for 30 Japanese EFL university

students, with creative nonfiction (CNF) being a central component, is described. By studying CNF, students can reflect on their lives and discover new meaning.

CNF is fact-based writing that uses fictional elements (Gutkind, 2012). The most famous work of CNF is Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), a novel-length work about the murder of a family in Kansas. Capote's book reads like a fictional novel but is a work of nonfiction where everything that is described is true. That is the essence of CNF. Forché and Gerard (2001) go on to describe CNF as "fact-based writing that remains compelling, undiminished by the passage of time, that has at heart an interest in enduring human values: foremost a fidelity to accuracy, to truthfulness" (p. 1). CNF is a popular genre of study, as there are more than 200 M.F.A. programs and 30 PhD programs in CNF in the world (Gutkind & Rubinkowski, 2024).

CNF was taught as a four-week module in a creative writing class. The module was taught to 30 Japanese EFL students who were in their third year and were English majors. Students' CEFR (Common European Framework for Reference) levels were determined by self-reported TOEIC scores and found to be around B1 to B2.

Weeks One to Four

In the first week of the CNF module, the five senses were explored. Students were taught to describe a scene using the five senses and later were asked to write a passage using the five senses about an event that happened to them in the past. For homework, students read Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Crossing* (2016). Her writing was chosen because of Lahiri's own language learning journey and the fact that her writing was written in an L2 (Italian) and then translated into English. Therefore, the writing was much simpler than comparable CNF.

In the second week of the module, students were given a short lecture on what to write about in CNF. CNF is a broad field. It has been stated that to separate fiction from nonfiction is "like dividing the realm of animals into birds and nonbirds" (Sanders, 2007, xv). CNF can generally be divided into the following:

1. Personal life
2. Culture and identity
3. Nature and the environment
4. History and real people
5. Social issues

Students then watched a video of Lahiri (McGraw Hill, 2020) talking about learning Italian. They then wrote about their own journey of learning a foreign language in 100 words. For homework, they read "The Dictionary" by Lahiri (2016) and wrote 100 words about "Personal life" from the list of CNF topics.

In the third week, students shared their short story draft with a partner to get peer feedback. They then expanded on what they wrote by writing a longer autobiographical piece of 500 or more words. For homework, they were to submit the final piece after some polishing.

In the fourth week, the students had a writer's workshop. A writer's workshop is a kind of peer feedback in creative writing classes first begun by the Iowa Writers' Workshop (Dana, 1999). Students share their work with the class, and the class discusses the work and provides oral and written feedback to the author. The students were then given a brief survey to answer. Students were asked two survey questions in Week Four given in a Google Form:

1. How much did you enjoy writing stories about your life? (Likert scale of 1 to 5)
2. Comment on writing about your life. Why did you or did you not enjoy it? Did you learn anything about this experience?

Students' answers were anonymous. The results of question 1 were 4.7 on a Likert scale of 5. The results of question 2 are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1
Results of Open-ended Question (n=26)

Answer	No.
Illuminating/nostalgic	11
It was a new experience	7
It was fun	3
Freedom of expression	2
Can improve language level	2
Can learn from others	1

The results show that students enjoy writing CNF. Most of the students stated that it was illuminating or nostalgic to write about themselves. One student wrote, "I found out

that the usual little event will be an important story for me.” Several students also stated that it was a new experience for them. One student wrote that “it felt very fresh.” Many others stated that it was fun and they could have the freedom to express themselves by writing CNF.

Conclusion

The approaches presented in this paper demonstrate how literature can be integrated into language teaching through creative writing in ways that promote personal expression, interpretation, and meaningful language use. Composing haiku through evocative voice pedagogy encourages learners to reflect on personal experiences, negotiate meaning, develop their voices, and draw on their linguistic, rhetorical, personal, and cultural resources throughout the writing process. Similarly, using wordless picture books encourages learners to construct meaning from visual narratives, create and share their own stories, and engage with broader themes such as intercultural understanding and the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, the pedagogical model using born-digital literature follows a three-phase process of meaning construction, individual response animation, and creative production, supporting students in developing interpretive competence and producing original creative work while remaining adaptable to a range of foreign language teaching contexts. Finally, the use of creative nonfiction provides students with engaging and personally meaningful writing experiences that can be incorporated into regular language courses with relative ease, despite the limitations of the present study.

As these approaches demonstrate, creative writing offers a student-centered means of integrating literature into the language learning classroom. By engaging with a range of literary forms, as shared herein, students are encouraged to produce original works of their own. Drawing on their personal experiences and exploring their individual interests can increase learner engagement, while the writing process itself can provide a foundation for subsequent activities, including group discussions and oral presentations.

Bio Data

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