

Developing Voice by Composing Haiku: A Social-Expressivist Approach for Teaching Haiku Writing in EFL Contexts

Many college freshmen in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings have little idea how to use the English they learned in middle school and high school. They have studied grammar rules and the meaning of English phrases in preparation for university entrance examinations, but the focus on error reduction and memorization of forms left them at a disadvantage when they had to use English in real-world situations. The *social-expressivist approach*, which is at the heart of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), employs methods that contrast sharply with a grammar-centered curriculum, as it structures learning around communicative contexts where students learn to express their *voice*—the articulation of their personal needs, interests, and ideas—in a social context that presumes an *audience*—the teachers, classmates, and even the community at large.

In the EFL writing classroom, the social-expressivist approach is key to teaching students how to discover and reveal their unique perspectives on the world. In addition to bringing a large amount of useful English into the classroom, this approach makes EFL composition more focused, relevant, and meaningful.

Many educators know that studying and composing literature and poetry helps English learners develop their own voice and sense of audience, and to express important social ideas in the process. Poetry, in particular, offers special challenges, but one type of poem that is manageable for the EFL classroom is *haiku*, a short, three-line Japanese poem with a specific number of syllables in each line. A lesson based on reading and composing haiku naturally encourages students to express their inner feelings to others. Aside from facilitating the development of voice and audience

awareness, haiku also helps them learn to write fluently and acquire vocabulary because its form requires close attention to select the appropriate words to communicate specific feelings.

As of now, there has been scant reporting on the theoretical framework for teaching haiku in the second language (L2) writing classroom, and little research on how English haiku writing can contribute to literacy development from both theoretical and practical viewpoints. After exploring how the social-expressivist approach can facilitate EFL university students' development of voice and audience in the L2 writing context, this article will discuss how haiku fits in with that approach and will present some activities for use in the university EFL writing classroom.

Social-expressivist pedagogy and the development of voice and audience

At the tertiary level, L2 writers are expected to clearly describe situations and express their attitudes, ideas, and experiences. As L2 learners improve, they develop a unique voice and individual style, which is the ultimate goal of social-expressivist pedagogy. According to Ivanič (1998, 97), voice is "a socially shaped discourse which a speaker can draw upon, and/or an actual voice in the speaker's individual history, and/or the current speaker's unique combination of these resources." Just developing voice is insufficient because without an audience there is only one-way communication. According to Matsuda (2001), individuals acquire voice by using language over time in a variety of social encounters. Vygotsky's (1986) *inner speech* theory describes *self* as socially mediated before it is internally constructed; in other words, self develops with external factors such as language and culture. Bishop (1999, 17) also describes the need for writers to gain "a deeper understanding of the connections between thought, words, and life" in order to explore the self. Therefore, it is difficult to conceive of the concept of voice without considering the concept of audience. As many researchers relate, the development of a personal voice unfolds in conjunction with a sociocultural connection to the community; in other words, voice is

a process of personal discovery while engaging and sharing with others (Fishman and McCarthy 1992; Newkirk 1997; Gradin 1995; Bishop 1999).

The CLT classroom is an excellent venue to help EFL students develop voice and a sense of audience through writing. According to Gradin (1995, 110), social-expressivist instruction allows a person to negotiate "between themselves and their culture," which requires first "developing a sense of one's own values and social constructions and then examining how these interact or do not interact with others' value systems and cultural constructs." From this perspective, writing is an ongoing process of negotiation to make meaning, which in turn develops voice and a sense of audience in a specific community. The writing classroom is a crucial place for students to decide where to stand with consideration to others in the world (Bishop 2003).

Haiku in the writing classroom

Haiku is a Japanese poem that contains 17 syllables in a three-line 5-7-5 syllable pattern. Haiku is "the production of writer's voice reflecting cultural contexts" (Iida 2008, 174). It is a poetic form that allows Japanese writers to express their thoughts and feelings without being restricted to the simple observation and description of the natural phenomena surrounding a human life. Although haiku originated in Japan, its popularity has extended to other languages and teaching contexts. Haiku is now used in U.S. classrooms, including reading and writing haiku while studying Japanese literature in fourth grade (Stokely 2000) and composing haiku in a creative writing class at the secondary level (Cheney 2002).

Traditional haiku has structural features in addition to the 5-7-5 syllable pattern, including a seasonal reference (not always present in English haiku) and a *cutting word*, which can be either an actual word or a punctuation mark, such as a semicolon, a colon, or a dash. The cutting "word" prompts reflection by dividing the poem into two parts; this creates an imaginative distance, although both sections remain, to some degree, independent of each other (Toyomasu 2001).

The haiku below, which was written by the author, illustrates the syllable pattern: five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second, and five syllables in the third.

*A bright red maple
Whispering among green leaves:
A start of new life*

The seasonal reference is “bright red maple,” which is associated with autumn. The cutting “word” is the colon at the end of the second line; it divides this haiku between the first two lines, which provide readers with information about the context and what is happening, and the last line, which describes the writer’s thoughts and feelings.

The cutting word helps readers understand this haiku. “Bright red maple” informs readers that autumn is the general theme of this haiku. In addition, the phrases “a bright red maple” and “among green leaves” let readers imagine that the beginning of autumn is the season that the writer wants to describe. Of course, there can be multiple interpretations of the haiku. Some readers may interpret this haiku as sorrowful when taking “a maple” as a subject; others may think of the poem as something exciting when taking “new life” as a subject; still others may consider it a hopeful poem if they pay attention to the phrases “bright red” or “start of new life.” These interpretations and others are all valid, because reader-centeredness is a fundamental concept in haiku. It is crucial to provide a space where readers can freely interpret the poem and interact with the writer. It is much more significant for the writer to create haiku where interpretations of content can vary according to readers rather than compose a haiku that provides just one interpretation; a good haiku allows readers to have multiple interpretations (Iida 2008).

Since haiku is a means for allowing self-expression, it does not suggest what is right or wrong. Matsuo Basho, one of the greatest Japanese haiku poets, said the following about haiku: “Learn about pines from the pine, and about bamboo from the bamboo” (Haas 1994, 233). This means that haiku is neither a fiction nor an imagination; rather, it refers to a direct response to the

world. However, haiku should not be mere word sketches but must express something deep and thoughtful (Blasko and Merski 1998) and reflect how the writer feels. This humanistic approach opens up possibilities for haiku writers to seriously consider and express the relationship between themselves and the natural world.

A social-expressivist framework for teaching haiku composition

Haiku is a tool to construct and develop voice and ultimately define “who I am.” It helps produce a writer’s voice by reconstructing his or her experienced events (Suzuki et al. 2003). Hanauer (2004, 48) states that poetry writing is “a process of personal discovery that involves shifting unconscious linguistic functioning to conscious consideration.” Self-discovery is at the core of poetry writing because expressing personal experience encourages L2 writers to be more reflective and engaged and “to come to know who they are, what their beliefs are and why this is so. It views students as subjects in negotiation with language and the material conditions of existence, not merely as objects” (Gradin 1995, 118).

Haiku is not simply a means for private self-expression; composing and producing haiku is a communicative act that builds a writer-reader interaction. Haiku entertains readers, and it is the readers who judge the quality of haiku (Minagawa 2007). Therefore, composing haiku allows L2 writers to become sensitive to the writer-reader relationship, a fact that matches Japanese scholars’ theories of using haiku in the classroom, where it plays an important role in CLT (Suzuki et al. 2003). In composing haiku, L2 writers are required to situate themselves in a specific social context on the basis of experience, which underscores the significance of the enduring relationship between the writer and the outside world (Gradin 1995). How L2 writers take social positioning in composing haiku is crucial because it greatly influences the way they construct voices and express themselves.

Haiku provides L2 writers with opportunities to develop voice in a specific sociocultural context comprising not only individual

but also social realities. According to Hanauer (2004, 88), reading and writing poetry is “an approach to literacy that promotes literacy activities as a means of exploring the relationship between internal and external worlds of the individual.” Composing haiku, therefore, is an effective method for L2 writers to develop a critical sense of voice, audience, and a critical awareness of social realities.

Teaching haiku composition

Since developing communication skills relates to spoken and written communication, both of which require a speaker/writer and a listener/reader, the development of voice and audience is essential for EFL students to develop authentic communication skills. In this case, it helps to have students learn to read haiku before they begin composing.

Reading haiku

The purposes of reading haiku are to review the basic concept of haiku, analyze the structure, understand clues about meaning, and to develop a sense of how to interpret haiku. To begin, it is helpful to read a poem and then perform a textual analysis in an effort to construct meaning (Hanauer 2004). This process also allows students to discover the writer’s “voice” and understand its importance to composing a literary work.

To begin the process of textual analysis, the instructor asks the following questions about the haiku:

- How many syllables are used in each line?
- What is the seasonal reference?
- Where do you see a cutting word in this haiku?

The instructor allows a few minutes for each student to think about these questions and then discusses them in class. The instructor’s role in this activity is to lead the discussion and help students understand the special guidelines that dictate the form of haiku.

The next step is for the readers to give their interpretations, which the teacher elicits by asking the following questions:

- What is the theme?
- What is the context?
- What is happening in the poem?

- What does the writer want to tell you in the haiku?
- What is your impression from this haiku?

After each student makes his or her interpretation, students form small groups and discuss their reactions. Next, the instructor has students share their interpretations in class by asking them how they reached their ideas, what features in the haiku support their ideas, and most importantly, how thought, words, and life are interconnected. It is important that the instructor accept any possible interpretation of haiku offered by students. Their interpretations will be their response to the writer, which is based on their negotiation of haiku; in other words, the reading process develops a greater sense of a reader-writer interaction and enables students to understand how meaning is constructed from a reader’s perspective.

For example, there are different interpretations possible of the previous “bright red maple” haiku. From the writer’s viewpoint, this haiku describes a scene where he watches a maple tree from a window in his apartment while feeling the change of season and recalling his first day of having attended a class in an American graduate school in September 2005. This haiku, on the one hand, tells readers the seasonal transition with the phrases “a bright red maple” and “among green leaves,” while “a start of new life” refers to the beginning of autumn. The writer, on the other hand, attempts to convey to readers his experience of studying abroad in the United States. For a Japanese student who had no previous experience of studying abroad or participating in a graduate degree program, the first day of class was exciting, nerve-wracking, and even scary, not only because everything was new to him but because he could not visualize what was going to happen in class. This haiku mirrors the writer himself, and the phrases used in the poem describe his behavior and the situation surrounding him: “A maple” implies that he has no friends and that is why he feels isolated in class; “bright red” reflects his face, which is turning red with his extreme nervousness when he speaks up in class; “whispering” implies that he cannot speak loud and must keep his voice down

because of his nervousness; “green leaves” refers to his classmates whose face color does not change at all even when they speak up; and “a new life” reflects his new life in the United States, meaning that he has to survive by himself.

Of course, all readers will not interpret this haiku as above, nor does the instructor have to impose the writer’s intention on students. Some students may interpret the haiku as literal; others may go beyond it and make their own interpretation by reflecting on their own personal experience. Their interpretation may be similar, but it will not be exactly the same, and that is because of their different background experiences. Welcoming any possible interpretation helps students gain awareness of writer-reader interaction.

Students will understand the process of reading haiku if they practice reading and discussing several haiku in class. The more haiku students read, the deeper the understanding they will obtain. A series of reading haiku exercises will lead to the next activity, where students begin to write in their own voice for a specific audience.

Composing haiku

Various approaches to teaching the writing of haiku can be applied in class. Some students may have difficulty in composing haiku, and it may take time to produce the first one. Therefore, the instructor should simplify the composing process as much as possible. In addition, the instructor should aim to have students understand the process of composing haiku in the first writing class by following five steps of haiku composition.

Step 1: Review the concept of haiku

Composing haiku exercise starts with the review of textual features. The instructor explains that haiku is not a simple sketch of students’ observations but rather their direct, personal response to nature and events. Students must understand the main purpose of the activity, which is to develop voice and articulate self on the basis of their experience.

Step 2: Collecting material for haiku

Students go outside the classroom and find any place where they want to sit during a specific moment; the instructor asks them

to spend 10 to 20 minutes there to answer the following questions:

- What do you see and hear?
- What do you smell and taste?
- What do you feel?

This activity allows students to situate themselves to a specific time and place and integrate the concept of nature with their inner voice. They collect as many impressions as possible by answering the above questions.

Step 3: Composing haiku

Students use their collected impressions to compose their first haiku. Although they have much information from the previous activity, they may still have no idea about how to start the haiku. Therefore, the instructor asks students to consider what they want to say, or what their message is. Students can negotiate in groups or with the whole class about how their collected impressions help develop their voice and what words are appropriate to make connections of thought, words, and life to compose a haiku. Adjusting to the haiku structure requires students to come up with different vocabulary options that fit into the 5-7-5 syllable pattern. The instructor can help here by encouraging students to search among synonyms, which is one of the techniques for producing haiku.

Step 4: Peer reading

Peer reading is effective because it provides opportunities for students to see how an audience interprets and reacts to their voice and intent. After students divide into groups of three or four, each student reads his or her haiku aloud twice, and other group members note down their interpretations of the haiku. Next, they explain why they feel one way or the other about the haiku. The writer of the haiku then reveals what he or she wants to say or express in the poem. There will be varied reactions, which further enables students to build a strong sense of writer-reader interaction.

As a follow-up activity, the instructor asks students to make a list of five unforgettable memories in their lives. Students then free-write about each memory by answering the following questions:

- Where were you?
- What did you see and hear?
- What did you smell and taste?
- What did you feel?

This freewriting exercise is to collect as much information as possible to compose haiku, so students should focus on the writing and not worry about making grammatical errors. This can be difficult because EFL students often fear making errors in writing. However, too strong a focus on correct usage of English can prevent learners from freely expressing themselves. Poetry writing in an L2 should put emphasis on “self-expression and presenting a meaningful and personal language interaction” (Hanauer 2004, 57). The purpose of using haiku is communicative, so written fluency should take precedence over grammatical accuracy. One classroom technique to deal with common grammatical errors is to hold a mini-lesson and go over problematic forms beforehand. Another solution is to hold a conference with each student and give individual feedback.

Finally, after they are finished with their freewriting, students compose a haiku for each of the five memories, either in class or for homework.

Step 5: Publishing haiku

Preparing to publish haiku is an effective activity for students because it provides an opportunity to discuss submission procedures and increases the awareness of audience by going beyond the traditional perspective that the instructor is the only reader for their work. The following four websites welcome publication of English haiku:

1. World Haiku Association:
www.worldhaiku.net
2. The Haiku Society of America:
www.hsa-haiku.org
3. Asahi Haikuist Network:
www.asahi.com/english/haiku
4. The Mainichi Daily News—Haiku in English:
<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/features/haiku>

Conclusion

The social-expressivist approach to writing in the EFL classroom activates students’ awareness of both self and audience and

integrates them in a communicative, social context. Composing haiku in EFL university classrooms enables students to develop an identifiable voice with a high sense of writer-reader interaction. The resulting engagement provides plenty of opportunities for four-skill practice, group work, and fruitful discussions of a profound nature, which are all elements of successful CLT. Another benefit is seeing students move from internal and private stances to external and socially aware public positions.

Composing haiku

Lets you open special gates:

Exploring yourself

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