

Spice up your Classes with Haiku

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Being an EFL teacher in Uruguay for 27 years now has given me the chance to see lots of different teaching trends and techniques, but I must confess, I have not all too often seen suggestions or ideas on using poetry in class. Moreover, I am sure that most teachers in my country feel somewhat reluctant, when the time does come, to include poetry in their class planning. However, as in many other aspects of the English language teaching/learning process we have for a long time underestimated our students' capabilities, preventing them from using and writing poetry in our classes, for we have considered it to be too demanding for them and maybe, too time-consuming and not very profitable for our teaching purposes. This is the way things have been for a long time and I'm pretty sure that this is still the way things are in many English language classrooms around the world.

However, from sixteenth century Japan to the present time we have a unique form of Japanese poetry available to us: haiku verses — simple and easy to write, yet filled with emotion and at the same time educational. "Too elementary," some would say. But, like it or not, haiku verses such as the following:

Covered with the flowers,

Instantly I'd like to die

*In this dream of ours.*¹ (Toyomasu 2001)

have become popular worldwide, spreading throughout the world mainly during the past century. They have become one of the most popular forms of poetry today and an important manifestation of universal culture.

Unfortunately, they seem a bit ignored in Latin America. Colleagues from Uruguay and Argentina taking part in an on-going EFL Interest Section e-mail conference report very little usage of haiku in their writing classes or even knowledge about them. Due to the fact that colleagues teaching in countries neighboring Japan, such as EFL teacher Susan Babcock in Taiwan, among others, use them on a regular basis for writing purposes and include haiku verses in their class planning, there seems to be an "area of influence" explanation for their awareness and usage—principally eastern Asia.

Nevertheless, thousands of people publish outstanding examples of haiku in books and magazines devoted to this art in many countries (*Writing and Enjoying Haiku, The Sound of Water*). There are even worldwide contests for Haiku writers, the most remarkable contest held recently was the "World Haiku Festival 2000" held in London. Haiku is said to be like a photograph of some specific moment of nature or of an event in life. The precise nature of Japanese haiku strongly influenced the early 20th century Anglo-American poetic movement (1912) known as **imagism**, represented by Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, and others. This movement aimed at clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images. Imagism is considered to be a successor of the French Symbolist movement. Haiku is said to be written to transcend the limitations imposed by normal language use and the linear/scientific thinking that treat nature and human beings like machines.

Traditionally and ideally, haiku presents a pair of contrasting images, one suggestive of time and place, the other, a generally vivid but fleeting observation.

¹ By Etsujin. Japanese poet. Matsuo Bashô's disciple.

Working together, the verses must register a sensation, impression or dramatic moment of a specific event or fact of nature. The poet does not comment on the connection, but rather leaves the relationship of the two images for the reader to determine.

*Little butterflies
Floating over the flowers,
Spring is beginning.
(Student sample)*

What is haiku in English?

Haiku is a small poem with an oriental metric pattern which originated in the linked verse of 14th century Japan. This Japanese verse form, notable for its compression and suggestiveness is, in principle, a powerful tool to bring Emotional Intelligence Learning (i.e. the student's capacity to discern and respond appropriately to the moods, temperaments, motivations and desires of other people, as well as to access one's own feelings, discriminate among them and draw upon them to guide behavior) into the classroom, for it generally evokes certain moods and emotions. Haiku consists of three unrhymed lines of five, seven and five syllables, although some flexibility regarding the number of syllables is accepted, particularly when a Japanese haiku is translated into English.

*Gold, brown and red leaves (5 syllables)
All twirling and scattering, (7 syllables)
As the children play. (5 syllables)² (Henderson 1967, p. 41)*

Haiku is contemplative poetry which aims at enhancing the value of nature, colors, the seasons, contrasts and surprises. An old example of haiku written by the Japanese poet Matsuo Bashô, (1644-94) and considered the finest writer of Japanese haiku during the formative years of the genre, reads:

*Old pond ...
a frog leaps in
water's sound.³ (Carnegie, Grunow 1998)*

The Japanese concept of "cutting" divides the Haiku into two parts, with a certain imaginary distance between the two sections. Yet the two sections must remain, to a degree, independent of each other. Each section must enrich the understanding of the other. To show this "cutting" in English, either the first or the second line normally ends in a colon, dash or ellipsis.

Haiku verses usually refer to nature and the seasons:

*Summer school every day
Walking, walking with hot sun . . .
Melting ice-cream feeling. (Svendson 2002)*

The main reason for bringing haiku verses into the classroom is that, as with other techniques, it favors Emotional Intelligence Learning and helps our students develop and discover their Naturalistic intelligence—the students' capacity to relate to their surroundings and to be concerned about everyday environmental problems.

² By Gay Weiner.

³ Translated by William J. Higginson (1985). Used with permission.

It favors Existential Intelligence Learning as well⁴. It is an effective and easy way for our students to connect to their inner memories, emotions and feelings from the past; feelings that they might have thought were lost. Students seem to enjoy recalling these feelings a lot. We should be well aware of the relevant role Emotional Intelligence plays in the learning process and how it leads to successful learning when students are hooked emotionally to their learning environment. As socially responsible educators in our profession, teachers can use haikus, for they provide everything they need to bring emotions successfully into the classroom in a simple way.

*Sunset: carrying
a red balloon, he looks back . . .
a child leaves the zoo.*⁵(Henderson 1967, p. 30)

Working with Haiku in the classroom

You can teach your students how to write and share haiku verses in class by explaining the basic 3-line poem and the 5-7-5 syllable pattern. The haiku should aim at expressing moving events in their lives, the seasons or nature. Help them generate their own ideas in writing simple, line-by-line verses. Later, you can help them revise and polish their work, further engage the students' minds and even move the imagery toward the depth that can make a poem memorable. Have your students share their verses, and help them understand they are taking a glimpse into other students' precious life moments. This will help them understand how similar or different their perception of life can be. In this way students also learn a little more about their classmates.

When commenting on the relevance of Haiku verses, leading authority, translator and poet William J. Higginson (1938) reflected, "The primary purpose of reading and writing haiku is sharing moments of our lives that have moved us, pieces of experience and perception that we offer or receive as gifts. At the deepest level, this is the one great purpose of all art, and specially of literature." (Higginson, Harter 1989)

Getting Started

As a getting-started activity, teachers can have their students brainstorm words, colors, objects, activities, food and pleasant/appealing things related to each season that come to their minds and write them on the board. These could even work as a word bank for future reference.

Prior to the actual writing, you can introduce sample haikus to students on posters, on the blackboard, or on overhead transparencies.

At the same time, haiku is an interesting activity for pre-teaching syllable separation, which seems so difficult for the students in our region to master because of the notable difference in syllable separation from Spanish. English pronunciation does not directly reflect the way a word is written, whereas Spanish does (e.g. in-tel-li-gent / in-te-li-gen-te). It might therefore be useful for the students to

⁴ Carolyn Chapman (1999) says that in Gardner's latest book, he names existentialism as a possible intelligence among others (humor/ culinary/ spiritual/sexual). This places emphasis on individual existence, freedom and choice. Although existentialism has not officially been named, Gardner presents an interesting new view.

⁵ By W. F. O'Rourke, 1964.

have access to a dictionary to check syllabification. Access to a thesaurus may also be useful to find synonyms for the words they use to express their ideas.

Follow-up Activities

As a follow-up activity, teachers can have their students add another creative touch to their writing by having them illustrate their verses with an accompanying drawing or by designing borders related to the event described. Students can also come up with a simple title for the poem. As an alternative, we suggest displaying the poems on boards in the classroom without a title, and allow the students to move around the class reading one another's haikus and suggesting a title on an adjoining piece of paper.

Haiku can also be used as a means of reviewing grammatical structures by using, for example, adjectives in the first line, verbs in the second and a clause in the last line.

*White, pink and bright clouds –
Floating, playing against the sky,
Autumn is beginning.
(Student sample)*

Conclusion

When teachers succeed in creating a relaxed atmosphere in order to favor inward reflection, students find writing haikus relaxing and rewarding. They seem to be happy discovering their inner poet and they gain considerable self-confidence. So, regardless of the season, wherever you are, spice up your classes with haiku!

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