

The Use of Haiku to Stimulate Creative Processes in the English Language Classroom

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The Japanese haiku has become a well-known poetic form world-wide. This evidences its powerful ontological reality, something we teachers of languages and cultures can take advantage of in order to raise our students' awareness and motivation to learn about other cultural realities. We propose the use of haiku in English in Spanish-speaking contexts in order to create teaching proposals which will help students become aware of complex and rich processes involving two linguistic codes (Spanish and English) and a third cultural scope (Japanese).

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Haiku poetry has become a world-wide known poetic form; this should come as no surprise taken into account the powerful universal drive structuring this kind of poetry: it is extremely short, deceivingly easy to write and definitely seems to please every taste. Perfection, simplicity and depth are three characteristics that Barthes (2014) attributes to Haiku; this is the case in many ways, when facing a good haiku. These ideas, however, can be problematic, as the practice of haiku writing has often proven; experience should teach us to be on guard, and experience lets us know, that when something is fashionable and appears easy, one has to be especially aware of why this is the case and why it is perceived as such. Anyhow, haiku is a very defined and traditional poetic form. In Stryk and Ikemoto's (1981) words:

It looks so easy, something anyone can do. A most unfortunate view, for haiku is a quintessential form, much like the sonnet in Elizabethan England, being precisely suited to (as it is the product of) Japanese sensibility, conditioned by Zen. For Basho, Buson, and Issa, haiku permitted the widest possible field of discovery and experimentation (pp. 22-23)

Therefore, being such a "rigid" piece of writing, it would be useful to contemplate it from a more sensible perspective, from a retroprogressive stance, so to speak. According to Pániker (2003), our evolution is mainly based on retrogression because:

When the retroprogressive drive is not alive, the cultural layers piled prevent us from seeing the world afresh. This is the symptom some old

teachers suffer since they react to some new work with a “what is the point in writing another book if everything has already been written?” But, are we condemned to not being able to say anything new? We are not since we are able to “destroy” the accumulated culture in order to see the world with new eyes and, by so doing, paradoxically, generate new layers of culture which are, at the same time, newer and closer to the origin (p. 37).

Thus, it seems to be a good time to reconsider haiku. In fact, haiku can be a wonderful tool in education; it is a powerful genre, alluring, intriguing, at the same time highly concrete (in its depiction of the natural world, for example), and extremely suggestive (since reaching a final and definite meaning is almost impossible). This may be termed “the haiku attitude”; Yasuda (1985) already pointed out this with precision:

When a person is interested and involved in the object for its own sake, then, a haiku attitude is formed. It is therefore said that a haiku attitude is a state of readiness for an experience which can be aesthetic. Even if this aesthetic rush is not likely to appear, the powerful feeling of the “here-and-now” remains, but of course, the aesthetic should not be underestimated (p. 11).

It is therefore important to recognize how haiku performs as an enhancer in order to grasp reality in full sight; that is to say, haiku really helps us get into the flow of the moment and share the aliveness of the world by merely paying attention to what is happening in the here-and-now. It is important to promote this way of being in educational contexts since, while teaching or learning, one has to be aware or not be at all. In a way, that is why so-called “mindfulness” is becoming so valued, as shown, for example in Nhat Hanh (2007), Kabat-Zinn (2011) or Gunaratana (2012). Teaching is, in this sense, a risky activity. Just like the samurai should be focused on the fight, with every sense tuned towards what is happening, lest he wishes to lose his life, the teacher (and no less the student) must be very aware of the blooming power of every single moment and action within the classroom. This “haiku attitude” is a key concept that will help us develop the pages coming afterwards. No matter how small a haiku, how fragile or minute it seems, how to-the-point and factual its imagery may be, what this pearl of simplicity may offer can be massive if we let its subtleness pervade our lives. As Tanizaki (2014) has pointed out, “a seemingly insignificant instrument may produce infinite repercussions” (p. 24).

Haiku and Creativity

Haiku can help us as language teachers by encouraging creativity, both linguistically and literarily, as both are interrelated due to some generic rules that make haiku one of the most quintessential lyric forms in world literature.

For starters, the main reason why haiku can stimulate verbal creativity lies in its shortness. In other words, the restrictions imposed on haiku writing favor a creative drive born out of scarcity. This can of course be overcome by means of technical preparation, as Henderson (1985) or Brunel (2003) have pointed out. This is another

way to understand what Reichhold (2013) termed as “saying things simply” (p. 42). Three short verses with a fixed syllabic pattern of 5-7-5 is a tight form indeed; here, the aesthetic meets the surgeon-like precision of the mathematician and, in many ways, science (methodological and technical abilities) goes hand in hand with art (intuition and improvisation forged by a creative mind).

Another way to stimulate verbal creativity lies in the restricted set of imagery concerning the natural world and, more precisely, seasonal references. Paradoxical as it may seem again, creativity is born out of necessity and not so much out of freedom. The haiku writer should be both traditional and innovative, and this tension beautifully generates creative drives. Knowing the haiku tradition allows the modern haiku writer to explore new grounds without losing a guiding light, a sense of belonging to a well-settled tradition. How afar he or she wanders is really a personal choice but the danger of getting out of the haiku genre will be always present.

Finally, the language of production also becomes a source of creativity. From our point of view, haiku is a wonderful tool both in the first and the second language classroom. As a matter of fact, that is what the authors have been doing so far, mainly at the elementary school level, but also in the higher echelons of the Spanish educational system (a College of Education, for example). This is easily understood when we pay attention to the haiku traits we have discussed above: shortness and a fixed set of vocabulary. This allows haiku to be used almost at any educational level, as far as a second language is concerned; it is also a wonderful way to introduce cultural references and develop multicultural competence, given that haiku is culturally Japanese and the language we may be working on is a second language. We are hence facing a proper ground for cross-fertilization, so to speak. Imagine we are working in Spain at the elementary school level teaching English as a second language and we decide to introduce the Japanese haiku to stimulate linguistic and literary creativity. While we keep on working on grammar and vocabulary, we will simultaneously work on, and develop, students’ basic skills within a new cultural frame: the Japanese literary tradition, a further inquiry for our students, requiring a more in-depth exploration.

Haiku in the Classroom

So far we have talked about haiku as a poetic genre defined by a set of rules that may help us stimulate students’ linguistic and literary creative processes in a second language. How can we implement haiku in our English Language courses for primary schools in Spanish-speaking contexts? In the following pages, we include a couple of examples illustrating a more in-depth set of activities.

A reflection about meaning and interpretation, however, appears necessary prior to presenting some activities we may undertake with our students. Marshal and Simpson (2006) were quite thorough as far as what can (and cannot) be inferred within the closed and hermetic structure of a haiku:

And so we were, talking about whether or not a haiku can be deconstructed. Of course they can, I said; they’re made of language, sparse

though it might be in any given haiku, and there are certain assumptions inherent in the form and built into every haiku – assumptions, say, about things, like ‘oneness’ or the ‘haiku moment’. No, they can’t, she said, because the idea of haiku is to get beyond language, to achieve a transparency of language inherent in worldlessness, and the whole point is to be suggestive – to avoid overt statement or claims that can be pinned down. If it doesn’t make a specific claim, then how can you demonstrate through deconstruction that language is slippery and cannot be relied upon, can never be pinned down to a particular meaning? (p. 119)

And this is so much the case, as any haiku student or writer has experienced frequently. Again, the fixed form asks for an effort both in the reader and the writer. Despite the visual aspects generally associated with haiku, it is important not to forget its literary stature; as such, it depends on words, grammar and discursive elements. This is why, once again, haiku may become an excellent tool in the second language classroom. This verbal ontology must be restated one more time:

If the genre determines the possibilities of a poem and gives it character, the fact that haiku has 17 syllables makes it even more dependent of the expressive possibilities within them. Thus, haiku works through its history some procedures which are necessities. It is a type of poetry so essential that a rarely you will find a verb in it, which does not mean that in the translation a verb will not appear. Sentences are truncated and special words are often used, as the ones termed *kiriji* (*kana, ya, keri...*) which have a value of suspension of the discourse (Fuente Ballesteros, 2005, p. 10).

Taking this into account, the first exercise we would like to propose addresses the introduction of haiku to our students. In this regard, we will get into the world of haiku by presenting some classic examples and creating a hyper-simplified version of the most famous haiku by Basho, that about a frog jumping into the water. Consider the following translation by Ueda (1989):

The old pond -
A frog leaps in,
And a splash.

Can there exist a simpler example than this? Probably not. For our activity, we would use the following shortened version for our classroom: A Frog / A Pond / Splash. With this in mind, the students will hopefully grasp as quickly as possible the basic structure of the haiku: a short poem (three verses) presenting a scene from the natural world.

After creating some discussion about the haiku, we would get to the heart of the exercise by stimulating students’ creativity and reaching further depths of complexity in later sessions. Our students are supposed to familiarize themselves with the new genre by reading some haikus and “doing some things” with others. We focus then on interpretation and comprehension; this is why some translating exercises can be proposed within a background encouraging creativity. About the things “to do” in

this first encounter we would advise to undertake some translating exercises. For example, with Baho's poem about the frog we would propose students write a haiku stating the opposite situation (in other words, an "inverse" translation).

In so doing, students are left to wonder about the meaning of the exercise, since it may be interpreted in various different ways: Does it mean to reverse the order of the verses? What is the opposite of a Frog? Is it a Toad, a Princess, a Cow? As you can see, this is a way to stimulate creativity and at the same time work on basic items in the second language. Vocabulary, morphology, and pronunciation will be taken care of when the poems are read aloud. The process of brain-storming that should precede the final answers can be undertaken in groups. This will make the activity even richer since the students will have to exchange views and propose solutions. We want our students to explore freely but with some sense of guidance, and haiku allows for that. Setting rigid margins, haiku gives a sense of what may be possible; therefore, one has to be at the same time adventurous and prudent. A haiku may turn into something else if we leave tradition behind, but a haiku which does not take into account the creative originality of each and every moment will never be a good haiku. This art is not for the faint-hearted. This is art for life. We are reaching koan levels in our discourse, something that usually happens when we talk about haiku.

Following this first exercise (the number of sessions will depend on the teacher's objectives), we will focus on students' actual writing of haikus. We have to be clear about how many of the so called generic pointers of the haiku we want to introduce at one time. It seems wise to aim low in order to make sure students get the gist of haiku, and that they don't feel overwhelmed by the alienations that may hurt a teaching session. This may happen when students feel the contents offered are not interesting or too foreign to their nature or background cultural references. Therefore, we should present our students the seasonal word known as *kigo*, one of the most archetypal features of any haiku (Rodríguez-Izquierdo, 1994; Haya, 2007; 2013). *Kigo* is a word relating to a season that the reader will associate with the scene in the poem. Once this word is introduced, the students will have most of the elements to produce a haiku. Creating a good haiku is more difficult, but once students know that haiku is a short poem composed of three verses and with a *kigo* or seasonal word, it is easier for them to start writing haikus. While this demands creativity and accuracy, it is necessary to take into account the proficiency level of the group and the objectives guiding the sessions. From our experience, it is a time of discovery, of adventurous raids into the realm of new words and semantic fields; time as well to discover how students feel about the seasons and the natural world; lastly, time for communion, since haiku helps open one's heart to the otherness by stating views on the natural world as apprehended from within. Haiku writing speaks of our true self; the way we see the world reveals who we are inside up to a certain extent.

Conclusion

The concise nature of haiku offers room in the second language classroom to explore linguistic creativity, regardless the second language we teach. The authors of this manuscript have just explored this process while teaching English in Spanish-speaking contexts. The tricky part is to get students involved in the activities, to increase their interest in their own haikus. Provided the proper ground, the genre itself transcends cultural limitations. Despite its deceptively frail nature, haiku is a robust genre, with a clear form and sense of direction, which helps the neophytes.

We face a very small world in haiku, but a world wide enough to roam freely when we discover that the frontiers are somewhat flexible. Just like bamboo wood, haiku is strong and flexible. With this idea in mind we wish to finish these pages sharing with the reader a wonderful haiku by one of its classic masters, Issa, which celebrates the beauty of being alive in a shining world of minute wonders offered freely to every and each one of us:

Pearls of the dew!
In every single one of them
I see my home.
(Taken from Mackenzie, 1984)

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