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Author

Maruki, Yasutaka

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Communicating with Humor: Poetic Exchanges in the L2 Classroom

YASUTAKA MARUKI

Pacific University

E-mail: maruki.y@pacificu.edu

As we strive to improve speaking skills in the L2 classroom, we often aim at “correct,” standardized language over the actual meaning of the spoken words. With less investment in the content, it is difficult for L2 students to appreciate the interactions and enjoy, for example, humor using the target language as they tend to remain continuously passive in the learning process under the pressure to speak accurately. In order to motivate students to communicate with their own voices in a relaxed learning environment, this report introduces a new way of expression and communication using a target language, that is, the use of linked poetry, in which students follow the rules of a mora/syllable pattern and exchange written poetic expressions with one another. This exercise of student-driven word choice in a stress-free setting triggers laughter and enjoyment that increase students’ incentive to appreciate the meaning of each word and the possibility of word combinations in the target language.

INTRODUCTION

Humor can be a testament of language ability. Being able to employ humor while conversing in an unfamiliar language demonstrates high levels of linguistic and communication skills as well as the possibility of belonging to a new community. However, understandably, it is not an easy task. We tend to develop anxiety, rush to respond, and end up conversing only on the surface level. For example, after a Thanksgiving break, I asked my students in a second-year Japanese language class about what they ate for holiday dinner, to which one of the students answered, in perfect Japanese, “I ate foods.” I quickly asked a follow-up question in Japanese, “Oh, is that so? Then, what kind of foods did you eat?” The heart of this quite bizarre interaction was not just the student’s obvious answer, but also our pretentious performance of a seemingly “natural” conversation. In the language classroom, we may focus too much on “correct,” standardized language, and not enough on the actual content. Rather than focusing on standardized or normalized expressions in a new language, I argue that by experiencing wordplay and actively participating in the conversation, students can become informative and forthcoming in sharing ideas or images that come to their minds. For this purpose, this report proposes a method of encouraging students to communicate humorously and creatively, following the Japanese tradition of linked poetry, *renku*, with its tradition of playful, comic word choices.

BACKGROUND

Humor is known to reduce classroom anxiety, promote classroom attendance, increase mental sharpness, and improve faculty performance in language classrooms (Farnia & Mohammadi, 2021; Seidman, 2016). Hempelmann (2016, p. 50) goes even further and states that humor plays a vital role in providing “students with intrinsic motivation, insight into the workings of language, and a window into human interaction in general.” Despite humor’s positive impacts, scholars have also addressed the challenges of understanding humor in the L2 classroom.

Ayçiçegi-Dinn et al. (2017, p. 8) speak about “comprehension difficulties, altered timing characteristics (because of slower processing in a foreign language) and emotional blunting (reduced emotional resonances in foreign language).” In addition to linguistic challenges, even for those who are at an advanced language level, humor often poses cultural challenges, as certain forms of humor, regardless of the content, can be unfamiliar in other countries (Deneire, 1995; Oliveira et al., 2019; Prichard & Rucynski, 2018).

Moreover, as much as humor brings people together, it can also isolate the person who does not understand: Morain (1991, p. 406) speaks of “the compelling urgency” among L2 students who experience the “emotional impact of not being able to share the humor.” Schmitz (2002) categorizes types of humor by the language level of the students: the elementary level is for universal or reality-based jokes, and as the language skill reaches intermediate and advanced levels, linguistic/word based and culturally referred jokes may be introduced. Wulf (2010), in his L2 humor competence curriculum, claims that just as L2 students improve their linguistic skills, their humor competence can be improved through acquiring appropriate sociocultural knowledge of the target country. Ultimately, many scholars agree that understanding and appreciating humor in a new language will lead to the improvement of one’s intercultural competence (Morain, 1991; Oliveira et al., 2019; Prichard & Rucynski, 2018; Wulf, 2010).

However, this stance of identifying or understanding humor is based on the premise that humor has been already present in the medium and is waiting for us to discover. If so, students will remain always passive. For example, Bennet (2004, p. 73) argues that people with high intercultural competence are “better at adapting” to cultural differences. This adaptation implies rather a passive stance since, as far as humor is concerned: we must first acquire necessary knowledge in order to uncover or decode humor. This may be problematic, since humor is often instinctive. To make matters worse, we may be always one step behind; as Seidman (2016, p. 100) says, humor, or youth culture in general, is constantly changing and evolving. In sum, as Bell and Pomerantz (2015, p. 3) point out “L2 learners are consumers, not creators of media and entertainment in their new language,” including humor.

Rationale

That said, even though L2 speakers may lack the necessary cultural or social knowledge to enjoy all the humor of the target language, their disadvantage can actually serve to create humor. It is often the case that when the students are able to focus purely on the word or the combination of words, their expressions and the conversations become innovative and heartwarming at the same time, as they can tear down social norms and describe an image or a thought without any preconceived notions.

Therefore, this pedagogical report proposes aiming at the production of L2 humor instead of aiming at utilitarian aspects of language skills, including the ability to understand L2 humor. Specifically, this report introduces the practice of collectively writing poetic lines called, *tsukeai* in the work of composing linked poetry, *renku*, wherein each poet accepts what has been written by a fellow poet and uses it as the inspiration for one’s own poetic line. For example, in a group of three people, the first person would write a 5-7-5 mora/syllable poem. Next, the second person would write a 7-7 mora/syllable poem as a response to the first poem. Then, the third person would write a 5-7-5 mora/syllable poem based on an image or message expressed in the second poem. Then, the first person would write a 7-7 mora/syllable poem based on the third poem, and the rotation would continue.

The origin of *renku* goes back to a classical period in Japan that people wrote poems collectively exchanging poetic lines of 5-7-5 pattern and 7-7 pattern. However, in the early twentieth century, a famous writer, Masaoka Shiki, inspired by Western individualism, criticized the collective aspects of writing poetry, declared the first part of a 5-7-5 pattern to be an independent form of poetry, and named it *haiku* (Narukawa, 1999, p. 14). *Haiku* became popular internationally and is now written in different languages, but *renku* was almost forgotten for a long time and is only now gradually regaining popularity (Igarashi et al., 2008; Yazaki, 1998).

To identify the humor created during poetic exchanges of *tsukeai*, jokes or pans are not necessary. Instead, the humor effect of *tsukeai* is best explained by Incongruity Theory: it is the humor caused when “some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations” (Morreal, 2009, p. 9). The key component of violating “our normal mental patterns and normal expectations” is due to the need to fit the mora/syllable pattern, which both limits the choice of the words and introduces new and unexpected ways of expressing ideas and thoughts in words. One person follows a certain mora/syllable pattern and composes a poetic line, and when the next person creates another poetic expression following a certain mora/syllable pattern, we do not know what will be the inspiration for the new poetic line. Of course, some images or topics can be predicted but the prediction often does not last and soon we face an unexpected result. And this is when humor is experienced. Thus, importantly, it is not the use of certain words that causes humor; it is the breaking of expectation.

IMPLEMENTATION

In this section, I chronicle the implementation of *tsukeai* in my second-year university-level Japanese class, including notes on implementation for other levels and languages throughout.

Set Up/Preparation

A major component in writing poetic exchanges of *tsukeai* is the counting of morae or syllables. A language such as Japanese and Slovak is considered to be a mora-timed language, as each character represents one mora; admittedly it is the easiest for this kind of poetry, when we choose words specific for a certain number of morae. For syllable-timed languages such as Czech, French, Italian, Korean, and Spanish, the length between each syllable is also relatively the same, so the students are able to count vowels and construct phrases with 5 and 7 syllables. Counting syllables can be more difficult for stressed-timed languages such as English, German, Portuguese, Russian, and Thai, as they have stressed or accented syllables and unstressed or unaccented syllables, so that the same word or words can be pronounced differently.

However, there is no need to stick with 5 or 7 morae/syllables; if necessary or suitable, the number of syllables in each line can be changed in the beginning of the exercise. For example, the poet William Higginson (2003, p. 1) suggests English Haiku should follow 2-3-2 accented beats rather than the syllable pattern of 5-7-5, noting that the 5-7-5 syllable pattern in English sounds awkward. That is to say, taking the middle between the pattern of 5 and 7 and that of 2 and 3, the pattern of 3 and 5 can be one of the options for syllable-timed language and stress-timed language.

Another possible modification for syllable-timed languages and stress-timed languages is just to count strong vowels or stressed/accented syllables and skip weak vowels or

unstressed/unaccented syllable. The main goal is to avoid exceptions as much as possible. It is through faithfully following the arbitrary rule of numbers that the students come to experience the incongruity-based humor of unexpected images or thoughts.

Thus, before writing *tsukeai*, the first step is for the instructor and the students to decide the numbers of syllables or morae that they will follow and then maintain that combination (see Table 1 for summary of potential patterns).

Table 1

Possible Morae/Syllable Patterns by Language Type

	Mora-Timed Language	Syllable-Timed Language	Stressed-Timed Language
Mora, Syllable, or Strong Vowel Pattern	5-7-5 & 7-7	5-7-5 & 7-7 3-5-3 & 5-5	3-5-3 & 5-5 2-3-2 & 3-3

In my class, I followed the conventional 5-7-5 and 7-7 pattern. The key factor in deciding the pattern is that the number of poetic lines needs to be short enough for students to write relatively easily, but it also should not limit the word choices.

After deciding the mora-syllable pattern, the next step is to familiarize students with counting syllables or morae. Knowing the number of morae or syllables of the words, the students can better prepare to construct certain mora/syllable patterns. Suzuki introduces another useful preparation, which is to have sample poems with the target more/syllable pattern available to students (Igarashi, 2008, pp. 15-22). For example, an instructor of Japanese could introduce the following set phrases and ask students to fill in the blanks with correct syllables/morae, indicated in the first column. Among the lines of 5-7-5-7-7, the first 5 morae (*my favorite things*), the second 7 morae (*now I sit comfortably*), and 4 of the last 7 morae (*enjoy watching*) are predetermined.

Morae	Japanese	Transliteration	English
5 morae	好きなもの	<i>sukinamono</i>	<i>my favorite things</i>
7 and 5 morae	[] []	[] []	[] []
7 morae	ふところ手して	<i>futokoroteshite</i>	<i>now I sit comfortably</i>
7 morae	[]見物	[] <i>kenbutsu</i>	<i>enjoy watching</i> []

Here are examples of the completed 5-7-5-7-7 pattern (Igarashi, 2008, pp. 16-17):

Morae	Japanese	Transliteration	English
5 morae	好きなもの	<i>sukinamono</i>	<i>my favorite things</i>
7 and 5 morae	[バレーに野球] [バスケット]	[<i>bare-ni yakyu</i>] [<i>basuketto</i>]	[<i>volleyball, baseball</i>] [<i>basketball</i>]
7 morae	ふところ手して	<i>futokoroteshite</i>	<i>now I sit comfortably</i>
7 morae	[スポーツ]見物	[<i>supo-tsu</i>] <i>kenbutsu</i>	<i>enjoy watching</i> [<i>sports</i>]

Morae	Japanese	Transliteration	English
5 morae	好きなもの	<i>sukinamono</i>	<i>my favorite things</i>
7 and 5 morae	[地震雷] [火事親父]	[<i>jishin kaminari</i>] [<i>kaji oyaji</i>]	[<i>earthquake, lightning</i>] [<i>fire, old man</i>]
7 morae	ふところ手して	<i>futokorotesbite</i>	<i>now I sit comfortably</i>
7 morae	[恐怖]見物	[<i>kyoufu</i>] <i>kenbutsu</i>	<i>enjoy watching [terror]</i>

After students have practiced filling in the blanks, the instructor can keep the first line and increase the number of blanks. At this point in the exercise, it is all about familiarizing students with choosing words based on the mora/syllable pattern. I often notice that students seem to feel that they need to talk about themselves, so they need to be reminded that it is certainly fine for them to exercise their imaginations. They can also practice being free from a formal grammatical sentence structure and focus mainly on the vocabulary.

To summarize, here are the preparation steps:

Prep-Work Summary

1. Choose the mora/syllable/strong vowel patterns (a short line and a slightly longer line); see Table 1 for examples.
2. Have students practice coming up with examples with specific morae/syllables, encouraging students to find words with a variety of topics related to everyday life.
3. Have students practice writing poetic stanza using blanks. The number of blanks can be increased as the students become more confident with composing poetic lines.

Activity

After practicing pre-*tsukeai* exercises of composing simple poems with the mora/syllable pattern, on the day of writing linked poetry, the students sat in a circle and each student wrote one poem of *renku*, using the 5-7-5 pattern on the blank sheet of paper. Following the tradition of *renku*, I suggested that the students write the first poem describing a certain weather or season and repeatedly reminded them that they did not have to come up with some clever poetic expressions. Each student wrote their first poem in three to five minutes.

Next, the students passed the sheet to the left and received another sheet from the right. Then, they were told to write the poem of 7-7 pattern responding to the poem written by the student sitting on the right. Thus, the students first wrote the line of 5-7-5 pattern and then the line of 7-7 pattern alternately.

To break down the process of responding to their partner's poem, the students first visualized the image depicted by the fellow student, and then, based on an object or a feeling in the image, came up with another image and searched for words that would fit the pattern. Each student spent approximately three to five minutes for writing this poem.

As the instructor, I constantly chipped in to provide suggestions and functioned also as a referee, counting the mora/syllables and commenting on the accuracy of the grammar and the vocabulary. I also criticized and corrected poetic lines that featured rather mundane, natural beauty or clichés. To allow the students to open up their ideas and thoughts, I kept

reminding them that they did not have to worry about creating what we normally consider as beautiful or pretty. In approximately one hour, most of the sheets had around seven or eight poems, so I asked the eighth poem to be the concluding poem.

To summarize, these are the directions:

Activity Instructions

1. Have the students sit in a circle and have each student write one poem describing a certain season or a weather with three lines (5, 7, 5 or 2, 3, 2 morae/syllables) all by themselves on the sheet.
2. Ask students to pass the sheet to the person sitting on the left and receive the sheet from the person sitting on the right and read the poem with three lines.
3. Ask students to write two lines (7, 7 or 3, 3 morae/syllables) based on the image or thoughts expressed in the poem just received.
4. Have students pass the sheet to the person sitting on the left and receive the sheet again from the person sitting on the right.
5. Have students write three lines (5, 7, 5 or 2, 3, 2 morae/syllables) based on the image or thoughts expressed in the poem just received.
6. Continue the rotation. Once the end time is near, the instructor concludes the poem with the latter part of two lines (7, 7 or 3, 3 morae/syllables).

OUTCOMES

There were thirteen students in my second-year Japanese language class. At first, the students showed hesitations, as they not only had to come up with poetic lines of a certain pattern, but also had to compose based on what other students had written. That is to say, in addition to creative skills, they needed to demonstrate their improvisational skills.

However, they soon came to realize that this was not an activity in so-called artistic expression, but an activity to communicate playfully with one another. Although it was a slow process, there was laughter, and overall, I was pleased with the excitement and enjoyment that the students expressed. Each line of either 5, 7, 5 pattern or 7, 7 pattern contains between two and seven words, and the students wrote ninety-eight lines in total, and more than half of the words that they used were not introduced in the textbook, *Genki II, an integrated course in elementary Japanese, 3rd edition* (Banno et al., 2020). Some examples of this new vocabulary can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Examples Of New Vocabulary Introduced During Linked Poetry Activity

Adventure	Convenient Store	Funeral	Paddles	Starbucks
Ankles	Dress	Heartwarming,	Pepperoncino	Strength
locked up	Dumplings	Jealousy	Seed	training
Buttocks	Far out	Midnight	Shift work	Sweat
Candy	Fluffy	Ocean wave	Snow figure	Trash
Colorful	Fluttering	Organic	Stain	Troublesome
				UberEATS

Although the students received inspiration from the poem written by the student sitting next to them, as they wanted to choose a word that fit perfectly into the pattern, they often introduced an unrelated object or feeling, which caused the incongruity-based humor. For example, one student wrote a poem that described a tiger and its strength, and the following poem was about riding a bicycle for exercise, and that led to a poem about not owning a car and the frequent use of UberEATS. Another example started as a sentimental depiction of walking alone in the rain at night, with the next student writing a poem about jumping around the paddles avoiding the socks getting wet; this led to the poem about children dancing triumphally. These transitions demonstrated the humor of Incongruity Theory. Despite being connected through an image or a topic, each line provided a new and unexpected perspective and sparked humor.

Moreover, to follow the pattern, I noticed that several students ended up using sentence ending particles, which function as exclamations or interjections in other languages. And this led to exaggerate or personalize the expressions of poetic lines and functioned as another source for humorous interaction. At the same time, the repetitive use of the same sentence ending particles could quickly sound mundane and easily lost the humorous effect. In addition, as the students passed the sheet in the same clockwise direction, the topic or the emotions sometimes became consistent and predictable. Next time, I may set a timer and change the direction of rotation to keep the freshness and the unexpectedness in reading the poetic lines.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have talked about using linked poetry in order to introduce student-produced humor into the L2 classroom by encouraging conversation/interaction through creating lines of poetry following a mora/syllable pattern. I believe that this activity of *tsukeai* is perfect as a part of the reviewing activity that occurs at the end of the semester or the term, as an instructor will be able to retrospectively refer to their students' poems to show how they have managed to use new grammatical expressions and vocabulary. In the future, I would like to discover how the practice of reading and writing linked poetry can be beneficial to the teaching of other languages. The conventional speaking practice of L2 is to imagine a real world outside the classroom, but in this practice, we are not only imagining, but also communicating by planting a seed in each poem for another person's imagination. Considering this collaborative nature of poetic expression, the poet Eleanor Wilner explains that this practice of *renku* is essentially un-American, when considering that Americans tend to be an "insecure and ego-intoxicated lot, solitary reapers of lean harvest of the self" (Toyama et al., 1997, p. 89). This is an exaggerated description, but it is also true that our society and educational system appear to be always enforcing one's solitary skill and achievement. I believe that the playful and humorous communication of poetic exchanges can create a stress-free environment for the students to explore combinations and usages of L2 words together. That is to say, paradoxically, the collaborative nature of *tsukeai* in the practice of *renku* helps us personalize and humanize our own individual ways of using the language.

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