

Writing Cento Poems in a Japanese EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This paper introduces an assignment in composing cento poems which was carried out in General Education Communicative English classes at a Japanese university. The instructor will show that although students may be unfamiliar with reading and writing poetry in English, they are capable of deriving and creating meaning from verse, and may also develop skills applicable to academic writing while engaging with creative texts.

Poetry in the EFL Classroom

As readers of this journal know, the use of literature in the EFL/ESL classroom has numerous benefits. Literary texts provide meaningful contexts, involve a profound range of vocabulary, encourage cultural awareness and critical thinking, and serve as a stimulus for composition. Furthermore, introducing literature in the EFL classroom is in line with Communicative Language Teaching principles, among other advantages (Begherkazemi & Alemi, 2010). More particularly, in regards to poetry, reading, writing, and sharing poetry in groups has the potential to improve students' self-esteem, problem-solving abilities, self-awareness, and communication skills, among other boons (Joritz-Nakagawa, 2012, p.17). Producing literary works in class also has a positive effect on language learning. For example, creative writing exercises help to give students a sense of responsibility for their own learning, thus satisfying my university's dictum to promote "active learning," and to understand literature from the "inside-out" (Sullivan, 2015, p. 40). With these concepts in mind, I have introduced literature into my own EFL classes in a variety of ways, such as in the creation of cento poems, which I will detail below.

Introducing the Cento

A cento is a poem made up of lines or verses of poems by other poets. It can be lines of different poems by a single poet, or lines of various poems by various poets. The cento dates back

to the third or fourth century when the poet Ausonius (310-395) remixed lines by Virgil. Many contemporary poets have also produced work in this form. T. S. Elliot's "The Wasteland," which incorporates lines from Elizabethan drama and 17th-century poetry, is one well-known example. I thought that writing cento poems would be an interesting exercise in my first and second year English courses. It seemed an effective yet non-threatening way of bringing poetry into the classroom. The students would not be required to read and comprehend entire poems; they would only have to select favorite lines. Furthermore, those students who struggled to come up with original ideas on the spot would be spared the pressure of creating a poem from scratch. This exercise would also give them some practice in scanning texts for general meaning. They would be permitted to use texts written by others, but they would be required to cite their sources. Although authors of centos are not required to cite specific lines and publication dates of their source material, I asked students to make note of the poets' names and the titles of the poems they used. Since earlier in the semester I had caught some students plagiarizing, I reasoned that this would serve as a lesson in proper attribution as well as a creative, literary endeavor, and might be something they would remember and apply when writing academic papers in the future. Furthermore, as Theresa Malphrus Welford suggests,

Writing a cento may be a kind of extension of the act of reading, a way to prolong the pleasure. What makes the cento so appealing a poetic form — and one with increasing popularity — is the opportunity to revel in quotations and yoke them strategically for a variety of effects beginning with surprise and humor and ending sometimes in clarity and vision (Welford, 2011, p. 21).

Preparation

From my extensive personal library of poetry, I selected about 50 books, choosing those which by virtue of title (*Call from Paris, The Amputee's Guide to Sex, America and other poems*, etc.), cover art, or content seemed likely to appeal to my Japanese college students. I first attempted this lesson in a Thematic English class of 51 first year Dentistry students who were taking the course to fulfil a graduation requirement. The class was held at the end of the semester during a make-up class.

Earlier in the semester the students had completed short written assignments and 1500-word short stories or essays, but I had not yet conducted a class devoted to poetry. As even native speakers of English tend to find the reading and writing of poetry daunting, I intended this class as a low-pressure introduction to contemporary poetry. I would not ask them to count syllables, consider rhyme, or decipher the poet's intentions. Rather, the students would be allowed to choose whichever lines appealed to them and use them to create a new poem with its own meaning. Since they would not have to generate language, I assumed they would be released from the poet's burden of "choosing precisely the right word not only for its denotations but also for its connotations via which meaning resonates through the poem" (Coles, 2015, p. 100).

Procedure

I began the class with a brief explanation of the cento form, then demonstrated composition by choosing lines from different books and writing a sample cento on the blackboard. The students were then invited to peruse the poetry books which I had brought or visit websites devoted to poetry such as <http://www.poetry.org> and choose the texts which most appealed to them. Although there is no set line-limit for a cento poem, knowing that some students would attempt only the bare minimum required, I asked them to produce poems of at least five lines. I was afraid that they might balk at the seemingly non-academic nature of the exercise, at the playfulness inherent in the form, and at poetry itself, but the students quickly became engrossed in the activity.

Some students sourced their poems from a single book, thus bringing to fore the poet's overall themes. For example, the following poem taken from five different poems in the book *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* by Judith Ortiz Cofer highlights the difficulties of speaking a second language:

She cannot say.
I could not speak English.
Try not to speak.
Nothing anybody can do.
We are talking in whispers.

Although I hope that this poem does not reflect the student's experience in my class, I imagine that

she could understand Cofer's sentiments in these lines, and even in fragments, the poems in the book resonated for her.

Many sourced their poems from different books and poets, such as this one by a male student:

She danced
Step forward, step back
I am all I ever was
I will do something
In a crowded Tokyo train

(from *Summer of the Black Widows* by Sherman Alexie, *From the Japanese* by Paul Rossiter, *Buying Breakfast for my Kamikaze Pilot* by Norman Stock, *Cleaned the Crocodile's Teeth* by Terese Svoboda, *100 Aspects of the Moon* by Leza Lowitz.)

The resultant cento poems often showed a narrative progression and thematic unity, such as the following:

I chain-smoked.
I don't know where I am.
I awaken in darkness.
I think about my life's most extraordinary moments.
I drank alone.
There was no one with me.
Its architecture even has special windows for viewing moon
To illuminate the darkness through the moon's light.
No time to rest quietly
I asked the bright moon to bring me my shadow.

(from *Lost Keys* by Seaborn Jones, *Ota Benga Under My Mother's Roof* by Carrie Allen McCray, *Despite Gravity* by Marjory Wentworth, *100 Aspects of the Moon* by Leza Lowitz, and *Aquamarine* by Yoko Danno.)

Clearly, the student poet made conscious choices when selecting lines from various poems. Images of darkness and moonlight are repeated, and the overall tone is melancholic.

The following two poems incorporate images of walking and memory:

We walk down the street.
I feel the earth move under my feet.
The sky is generous all summer
On the west of town.
We dream in the language we all understand.
What is there to remember?
The beach is nearly deserted.
We used to take long walks along the muddy rivers.
Sometimes it's hard remembering good times.
Thank you.

(from poems by Daniel Webster, Paul Beatty, Terese Svoboda, Gregory Dunne, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Diane Seuss-Brakeman, Catherine Bowman, and Ayukawa Nobuo.)

Tat-tat-tat on the door. The sun is already up.
They opened and closed their eyes
Hey comrade! Why do you keep silent?
Both you and I are tired, it was a lovely journey.
I gave now at myself and remember how to smile faintly.
Before your journey, you took me to your ship.
I heard the forest breathe.
We used to take long walks along the muddy rivers that run through this city.
We saw a black dog crouching on the bridge.
See you tomorrow. If there is a tomorrow,
I said to someone.

(from *Aquamarine* by Yoko Danno, *America and other poems* by Ayukawa Nobuo, *A Love Story Beginning in Spanish* by Judith Ortiz-Cofer, and Daniel Webster.)

Shortly thereafter, I attempted the same exercise with a class of second year nursing students. This time, I insisted that the students come up with titles for their cento poems. With the students' course of study in mind, I prepared some books of poetry related to illness and the body, however the students were not required to commit to these themes. Although these students were studying English to fulfil a requirement for graduation, not because they had a particular interest in English literature or the language itself, they applied themselves in a serious manner, carefully searching for the perfect lines, and came up with thoughtful, evocative poems during a single 90-minute class period.

Nature and My Life: A Cento

In a park I watch
the front yard walnut, branches frilled with May.
I smoke a pipe – it's ridiculous, I know, I know.
The ceiling of the world flows slowly overhead.
"I have an ocean and you have an ocean."
When I turned fourteen, my father said
I've managed to dream my way.
Every time we go on a long drive
I hold the seashell in my hand
and sleep like fish in the ocean.

(from "A Boat on a Lake" by John Gribble/ "Home on the Pike" by Amy Lemmon/ "Smoking" by Craig Morgan Teicher/ "Stramongate Bridge, 1 A.M." by Paul Rossiter/ "Split" by Michelle Battiste/ "Warehouse Work" by Virgil Suarez/ "Stride Rite" by Ona Gritz/ "What the Boy Said" by Cheryl Savageau/ "Dead and Gone" by Jody Azzouni/ "Mariam" by Prartho Sereno)

Again, the student poet has used the ocean as a motif in crafting this cento. The poem progresses from a park to branches of a tree to "The ceiling of the world," presumably a blue sky which flows like the ocean. The final three lines, taken from three different poems, form a coherent image.

Happy: A Cento

Last night he asked several times
Where is the nearest taxi stand? The nearest telephone?

After he leaves
my father is in the kitchen.
It is two o'clock, the hour
I sit on the summit
waiting for the 1st bus.
I ate the mangos.
I can almost smell you
under the sakura trees.

(from "Shipped" by John Kay/ "The Italian Phrase Book" by Richard Jackson/ "Reaping" by Jody Azzouni/ "Swallowing the World" by Prartho Sereno/ "August, 1990" by Ona Gritz/ "Basho" by Paul Rossiter/ "Commute" by John Gribble/ "Mango Eating in America" by Virgil Suarez/ "Four Nocturnes" by Amy Lemmon/ "After the Tsunami" by Lyn Lifshin)

The enjambment in the poem above indicates a deliberate choice and placement of lines. The reader can understand that "he" is the narrator's father, and the narrator sits "on the summit/waiting for the bus." The final two lines, taken from two vastly different poems — I can almost smell you/under the sakura trees — create an especially striking image.

As I'd hoped, some students even became caught up in reading entire poems and in sharing them with others. At the end of the 90-minute class, students exchanged their cento poems with each other. They were given the option of reading their poems out loud to the class, but preferred to read them silently.

After completing their poems, students were asked to write a brief assessment of the exercise. While most felt that creating a cento was difficult or challenging, their overall reaction was positive. For example, one student wrote, "It is difficult for me to understand what the author says, but it is interesting to connect some lines." Another student wrote, "I found that even if I don't read the entire poem, I can see nice sentences which move my mind. That is, reading only parts of poems is also interesting."

Conclusion

Although poetry can appear to be complex and intimidating even to native speakers, my Japanese students were allowed to interact with verse on their own terms. None of these students were majoring in literature or other humanities subjects, and few were especially proficient in English. While in some cases they may have taken a Basic English course to further the development of English skills acquired in senior high school, few had ever written a poem in English before this class. They were given simple guidelines providing structure, which freed them to concentrate on language. By choosing lines which they found comprehensible and which had resonance, they were able to construct personally meaningful poems out of lines written by others. Students found this exercise to be fresh and enjoyable, even when they found it to be difficult. I believe that this exercise could be expanded in a number of ways. Writing centos is a way to give students a taste of poetry, but it could also be a supplemental activity in a larger literary unit. For example, in the study of a particular poet, students could produce centos as a way of discovering common themes. Students could also create centos out of student-produced poetry, or out of non-literary texts.

Overall, this activity is highly adaptable and results in a sense of accomplishment in students. Furthermore, they can learn about a new form of poetry, develop a better appreciation for authorial ownership, and enjoy playing with language. The resultant poems show an understanding of narrative and an appreciation of language. Further study is necessary to determine whether the exercise heightened students' awareness of the importance of citation.

References

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