

Cross-Cultural Poetry Projects in a Japanese University EFL Setting

William Collins

Nagasaki University

william@nagasaki-u.ac.jp

Abstract

Recent research in second language acquisition has recognized the importance for learners of understanding how language reflects and is informed by culture. One important tool in understanding the intersection of language and culture is poetry reading. Reading target language poetry at appropriate levels, particularly in collaborative group projects, offers students the opportunity to explore universal themes common to all cultures and the role played by figurative language in animating these themes in the text. This article reports the results of a two-year study conducted in a Japanese EFL setting, concerning poetry reading in literature circles, online forums and group mind-maps.

The compatibility of literature and foreign-language learning has long been the subject of debate among EFL professionals with many educators questioning the ability of students of English as a foreign language to understand the culture-specific frames of reference underlying much poetry. But given that poetry from various language backgrounds often shares universal themes such as change, personal growth, loss, and filial love, poetry can be an excellent tool for facilitating student L2 communication in a cross-cultural learning context, particularly through collaborative learning activities such as literature circles and group mind-maps. In addition, given the unique power of poetry to stimulate reader-response and reflection, student-selected poetry and follow-up reflective writing exercises enable students to bring personal values and experiences into class discussions. Finally, the use in poetry of creative language play such as metaphor and imagery in encoding culture-specific schemas and norms offers students the opportunity to notice these values and explore them in class and online discussions.

This paper reports the results of a two-year study conducted in an EFL university setting concerning the impact of cross-cultural poetry study projects on raising students' awareness of metaphor and its role in introducing universal themes into poetry from different language backgrounds, and on developing students' expressive range in the L2 by fostering connections between universal themes in poetry and students' personal experiences. The study was conducted at Nagasaki University and included freshman Japanese non-English majors and exchange students from China, South Korea, Thailand, Philippines, Kenya and Turkey. The three main components of the study were: (1) literature circles and group mind-maps and (2) online multi-thread student forums as tools for increasing student discussion and reflection on universal themes in poetry; and (3) intertextual comparisons between English and Japanese poems.

Rationale for using literature and poetry for language learning

Bagherkazemi and Alemi (2010) argue that the benefits of using literature as a tool for language learning far outweigh the drawbacks. They note that while critics cite the culturally charged and context-reduced nature of literature as arguments against using it, these can be viewed as advantages. The way in which lines in literary text interrelate with each other to create an internally coherent meaning “engage the reader in interpretation, meaning negotiation and the generation of coherent discourse-based meaning” (p. 2). They also cite as benefits that

Meaning is the outcome of the interaction between the reader's experience and the text's language. It develops cultural awareness and serves as a stimulus for composition. It helps generate purposeful referential questions and provides for highly motivated small group work. (Bagherkazemi and Alemi, p. 2)

Widdowson (1992) emphasizes the value of poetry as an aid to cross-cultural understanding, arguing that “even if certain allusions are lost on a reader, this does not prevent them from making meaning out of the text in relation to their own realities” (p. 115) and that it “can provide the means whereby students, on their own initiative, acquire information about conventional realities other than their own” (p. 116). Widdowson (1992) suggests intertextual comparison and “grouping together poems about particular actualities or abstractions: animals, flowers, love, peace, loneliness, bereavement and so on” (p. 114).

Savvidou (2004) discusses three traditional approaches to using literature in the language classroom. In the cultural model learners consider the literary and historical context of a text. In the language model the linguistic features of the text are exploited for largely form-focused practice, disconnected from the literary meaning of the text. In the personal growth model, learners “make connections between their own personal and cultural experiences and those expressed in the text” (p. 5). She argues for an approach integrating all three of these as the best way to meet both linguistic and motivational goals.

Lazar (1993) explores a range of activities for use with poetry including having students brainstorm word associations, speculate on the symbolic meaning of a word and note down clusters of images/figurative meanings. She also suggests asking students to identify the two things being compared in metaphors found in a poem. She gives as an example, a poem which describes gulls flying “to the edge of the sea where the day’s fire is lit” and the comparison made is between the sun and “the day’s fire.”

Shelton-Strong (2011) argues that literature circles can improve students’ motivation to read and promote collaboration. The key roles and their adaptation to the poetry project in the current study are as follows: *discussion-director* writes down questions concerning the poems the group will discuss; *passage-picker* chooses passages from text that include figurative language, images, or are difficult to understand lines; *word-finder* check meaning of difficult words; *connector* connect the poem with universal themes, and with own (or classmates’) personal experience; and *reporter* takes notes of points raised in discussion and draws the group mind-map.

Carter (1998) argues that "our conceptual system is structured by metaphors" (138) and emphasizes the importance of metaphor in encoding cultural norms. Lakoff (1991) echoes this, stressing that in metaphor "we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another" (203). Deignan, Gabrys, and Solska (1997) define "conceptual metaphor" as "a connection between two semantic areas at the level of thought, such as ‘Anger is Heat’." They define *tenor* as the thing being described (anger), the *vehicle* as the word or expression used to convey the metaphor (heat), and the *grounds of likeness* are the similarities between topic and vehicle.

Background

The study was conducted in Nagasaki University's English Communication courses for first and second year non-English majors. The University Objectives for these courses strongly stress the importance of curricula focused not only on language, but also on cross-cultural themes. In the four years prior to the start of the current study, the author sought to address such themes by having students select an English text of interest and bring it to class to discuss with a partner. They were given the options of general information articles, quotations, English song lyrics and English poems. In all four years a large number of students, particularly at higher levels, chose English poems. Students said in surveys that they enjoyed reading English poems, but wanted to understand them better. Against this background, the author decided to begin devoting a small part of these freshman English courses to exploring English poems selected by students in previous years.

Research Questions

1. What sorts of learning activities are most effective in helping students gain better understanding and enjoyment of English poems?
2. How can poems be used to help students recognize themes common to all cultures?
3. How can student collaboration promote understanding of figurative language?

Participants

The first year of the study, which did not include the foreign exchange students, was confined to a single freshman English class of 45 students. The study group in the second year consisted of 35 freshmen and seven foreign exchange students in a cross-cultural communication class. In both years the freshmen were of upper-intermediate to advanced English proficiency. The foreign exchange students were all advanced and came from the Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, China (two students), Turkey and Kenya.

Methodology

The study employs an action-research method, the key elements of which are (a) identifying and investigating problems within a specific situation; (b) evaluating and reflecting on outcomes to bring about change and improvement in practice, and (c) basing changes in practice on the collection of information or data (Burns, 1999). In the current study, problems

were identified and outcomes were assessed each year on the basis of quantitative surveys and assessment of learning outcomes through analysis of students' submitted work, reading logs, online student exchanges and group mind-maps.

Tasks and Materials

The set of learning activities each year of the study will be presented in this section and then the outcomes that gave rise to each new set of activities in the following year will be explored in greater detail in the results section.

Year 1: Group Brainstorming, Universal Themes, and Student-Created Metaphors

During the first year of the study only two of fifteen classes were devoted to poetry-related activities. In the first lesson students discussed W.H. Auden's poem "Funeral Blues" in small groups to raise awareness of imagery and metaphor. For the second lesson, students were asked to choose a poem outside of class and use it to make a language exercise such as a cloze exercise or jumbled-order exercise. Students also wrote about metaphor in their poems and about how their poem connected to their own experience.

Group Brainstorming

The students worked in small groups of four with the Auden poem. The aim of the exercise was to give students practice in brainstorming word associations as a way to uncover the metaphorical significance of images in the poem. Students were given four nature images, "sun," "stars," "moon," and "ocean," used in the final stanza of the poem and asked to brainstorm word associations with their group. Adjectives or actions associated with each were recommended as the most helpful in understanding the grounds of likeness between tenor and vehicle. The results of this exercise are shown in Figure 1.

Universal Themes

To give students another analytical tool to discuss the content of their poems and link it to their own personal experiences, the author introduced a set of universal themes found in poetry from a variety of language-backgrounds: change, time/aging, mortality/death, memory/persistence of the past, the unknown/risk, loss, family/filial love, romantic love, sexuality, isolation/ "aleness of individual," society/community, ideal versus reality,

vision/inspiration/"the immortality of art," identity/reflection/self-consciousness, and communication.

Student-Created Metaphors

To help students understand that metaphors imply grounds of likeness between two objects, they were encouraged to make their own metaphors about an important person. Some examples of student metaphors are shown in Figure 2.

Year 2: Collaboration between Foreign Exchange Students and Japanese Students: Literature Circles, Group Mind-Maps and Native Poetry Comparisons

In the second year of the study, a number of changes were introduced. First, to encourage students to notice how the same image could be used in different poems to form different metaphors and explore different universal themes, the first author grouped sets of five poems sharing a common nature image. These nature images included flowers, water, stars, and trees/woods. Their selection was guided by an awareness of the salience of these images in classic Japanese poetry such as *100 Poems by 100 Poets* and also by their importance in the Auden poem. Also, given students' affinity in previous years for poems focusing on "love," "family," and "death," sets of poems with these common themes were also introduced (See Appendix 1 for a full listing of the poems). Second, an online poetry forum was introduced where students could share questions and impressions they had with each other. Third the seven foreign exchange students joined one lesson with the Japanese freshmen. For this lesson students had clear tasks to prepare according to literature circle roles outlined earlier. During the class each foreign student worked with the students to make a group mind-map summarizing all of the metaphors and universal themes in their set of poems. Finally students selected a native language poem and compared it with one of their English poems.

Results and Discussion

The results of each year's tasks are presented and discussed in this section.

Year 1 Results

A sampling of results from students' group-brainstorming activity for the Auden poem's nature-imagery is shown in Figure 1:

Sun	Lively, generous, keep us warm, give life, warm, bright, passionate, too powerful, blind if we look at, shining
Stars	Radiant, hopeful, small light in darkness, far away, twinkling, shining, eyes, give direction
Moon	Modest, sad, cold, quiet, silver, shine at night and disappear in daytime, keep an eye on us, calm, elegant
Ocean	Deep, wide, never end, mysterious, cover and drown us, powerful, storm, flood, give us power, hide many secret

Figure 1: Student Word Associations for Nature Images in Auden Poem

For the student-created metaphors, students were given the sentence frame “My-----is like-----to me. S/he-----and -----”. Some examples of student-created metaphors are shown in Figure 2:

<p>My friend is like the clear air to me. She is necessary always and refreshes me. My father is like bamboo. He can stand strong and adjust to various things. My mother is like the sun. She warms my heart and shows me the way. My boyfriend is like the ocean. He is deep and mysterious. My sister is like a cat. She is capricious and assertive. My father is like the sea. He is generous and big (fat).</p>
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Figure 2: Student-Created Metaphors

Student Survey

At the end of each year, the authors conducted a student survey on how each year’s learning components impacted students' understanding of metaphor and universal themes, and their overall satisfaction with poetry learning. Likert scale questions, the most widely used scale in survey research, were used (Brown, 2001). In the survey, respondents were asked to specify degree of agreement with a series of statements concerning each year’s learning-components. Students circled 4, 3, 2 or 1 with the descriptors *strongly agree*, *moderately agree*, *moderately disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. Table 1 shows the year-one results. Seventy-three percent of

students reported that the group brainstorming helped them understand the metaphors in the Auden poem.

Along with these positive outcomes, several shortcomings were noted in the year-one results. Only 23% said they understood the metaphors in their own poem, and only 44% were satisfied with the poetry activities overall. In addition, students were given a large variety of universal themes to choose from, but largely confined their selections to poems focusing on “love” and “family.” This was not surprising considering that only 27% of students reported that they understood the universal themes “moderately well” or “very well.” And despite student success in brainstorming and producing their own metaphors, very few students produced any comments about specific lines or figurative language in their poems.

Year 2 Results

At the beginning of the second year of the study, the freshmen were divided into seven groups of five and asked to choose from the seven thematically-linked sets of poems. Each of the seven foreign-exchange students was also asked to choose a set.

Student Reading-Log L1 Comments on Poetry

In the first five weeks of the third year of the study both the pharmacy students and the foreign exchange students were instructed to read one poem a week and keep a reading log. The pharmacy students were encouraged to keep written notes of their impressions. After five weeks when students had completed their first reading of all five poems, their notes were collected to analyze students’ noticing of metaphor, imagery and other literary devices. To give the reader a sense of the range of students’ perceptions of figurative language in the poems, a sampling of these comments is shown in Figure 3. Comments were in English except those marked with an asterisk.

Poem	Metaphoric Line Cited	Student Comment
“Dreamland”	Where sunless rivers weep Their waves into the deep,	The waves wash over the lives of two people. The image of the waves breaking and disappearing on the beach is like the end of their lives. The couple feels their death when they see this. They feel their love for each other and death in same instant. It’s very sad and beautiful. *
“Fire and Ice”	The world will end in fire... the world will end in ice	The fire is the violent war and also the peoples’ hate. The ice is cold people who have no feeling.
“Nature – the Gentlest Mother is,	Her Golden finger on Her lip - - Wills Silence -- Everywhere	Just as the golden sun setting brings the quiet of night, nature brings our lives to a quiet, peaceful end.*
“On the Breakwater”	Playing its searchlight, puzzled, abrupt, over a streak of green	In love too, we trying to find our way.*
“Falling Stars”	the falling stars raced and suddenly leaped across the hurdles of our wishes	Personification of falling star he wished on jumping over the wish suggests the wish will not come true.*
“Mother to Son”	“Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair”	Crystal shows “rare, beautiful” thing. So we can’t find a dreamlike easy solution to problems in our life.
“The Mother”	You remember the children you got that you did not get, The damp small pulps with a little or with no hair	The “damp small pulp” seems human, but was dead. I feel so sorry for that.
“To the Virgins to make much of time”	For having lost but once your prime you may for ever tarry.	Like seasons for flowers, timing is important in finding love. If we just wait and wait, we die without knowing love.
“Those Winter Sundays”	What did I know of love’s austere and lonely offices?	All the time father was doing that hard and painful work, why didn’t the child see that it was father’s way of loving him?

<p>“Bread and Music”</p>	<p>All that was once so beautiful is dead yet your touch upon them will not pass... And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes.</p>	<p>Scenes he saw with love no longer look beautiful without her. Household objects touched by lover keep the lover’s touch on writer’s heart even after lover is gone. The writer’s things and the writer himself became special and “holy” after being touched by lover.*</p>
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Figure 3: Excerpts from Pharmacy Students’ Reading-Logs

Online Exchanges, Literature Circles and Group Mind-Maps

To prepare for the discussion and group mind-maps, students were asked to choose a role to perform in the group literature circle. Students referred not only to their own notes of the five poems, but also consulted their classmates through the online forum. Online exchanges between group members resulted in many students noticing figurative language and receiving guidance from a classmate. Figure 4 shows examples of these online exchanges. All questions and answers were in English except where noted by *; comments by Philippine student are noted with a double asterisk.

Student Question to Classmate	Classmate’s Response
<p>“How can they talk without words?”</p>	<p>“Talking” is “communication,” like a touch or a look or maybe a gesture.</p>
<p>“Why ‘playing’ searchlight? Why not ‘shining’?”</p>	<p>I’m not sure, but trying to find something like a “hide-and-see” game?</p>
<p>I’m confused. The poem says “spring” but then talks about “crystal” and “cup”? And then it says incline your lips to the “glass”. What is this?? *</p>	<p>I think these are metaphors. The glass is the surface of the water and “glass” also means “mirror”. The “cup” is the lake-bed and the crystal is “magic” water. These nymphs are Goddesses. **</p>
<p>What does “survive our thirst” mean?</p>	<p>There is almost infinite water so we can never drink it all. The same is true of love</p>
<p>How can there be too much love?</p>	<p>Sometimes we get tired from being loved.</p>
<p>What does it mean “knees were twisted by the water”?</p>	<p>They are looking at their reflections in the water. The reflection in the water changes the shape of their bodies. **</p>

What does “willing to die in the commonwealth of joy” mean??	It’s taking a risk to love someone. We see other people happy in love so we want to try.
What does “sleep while it flows through regions of dark” mean?	Our dreams and feelings of love deep in our minds are like deep-flowing water.
It says “One by one we drop away”. What’s “drop away”? *	Drop away means dying. It says “we drop away”. Do you see “away” used again in the poem? **
Yes, it says “All that’s beautiful drifts away like the waters”.	Right. It’s a metaphor. People drop away like water drifts away. **

Figure 4: Student Questions and Answers in Online Forum

The discussion director used many of these questions for the literature circle and many of the quotes appeared on the group mind-map.

Group Mind-Map

The foreign-exchange students participated in the literature circles to stimulate the pharmacy students’ brainstorming for the group mind-maps. Students were asked to follow a set format in making the mind-maps (Buzan, 1993). The theme for their group’s poems was to be written in the center. They then drew five branches connecting to each of the five poems they discussed. On these branches they wrote the universal theme(s) they believed each poem explored. From each of the five poems they drew two to three more branches connecting to metaphoric passages from the poem. On the top of each branch they wrote the tenor and under each branch the vehicle. Figure 5 shows the final mind-map produced by the “water” group. This group consisted of a Philippines exchange student, two advanced and three upper-intermediate Japanese freshmen.

For example, the students argued that the poem “On The Breakwater” dealt with the universal themes of “romantic love” and “the unknown.” One of the lines they cited as metaphoric was “sitting on the breakwaters, talking without words.” They argued that in this metaphor, the “silent flow of water” was being compared to “communication without words.”

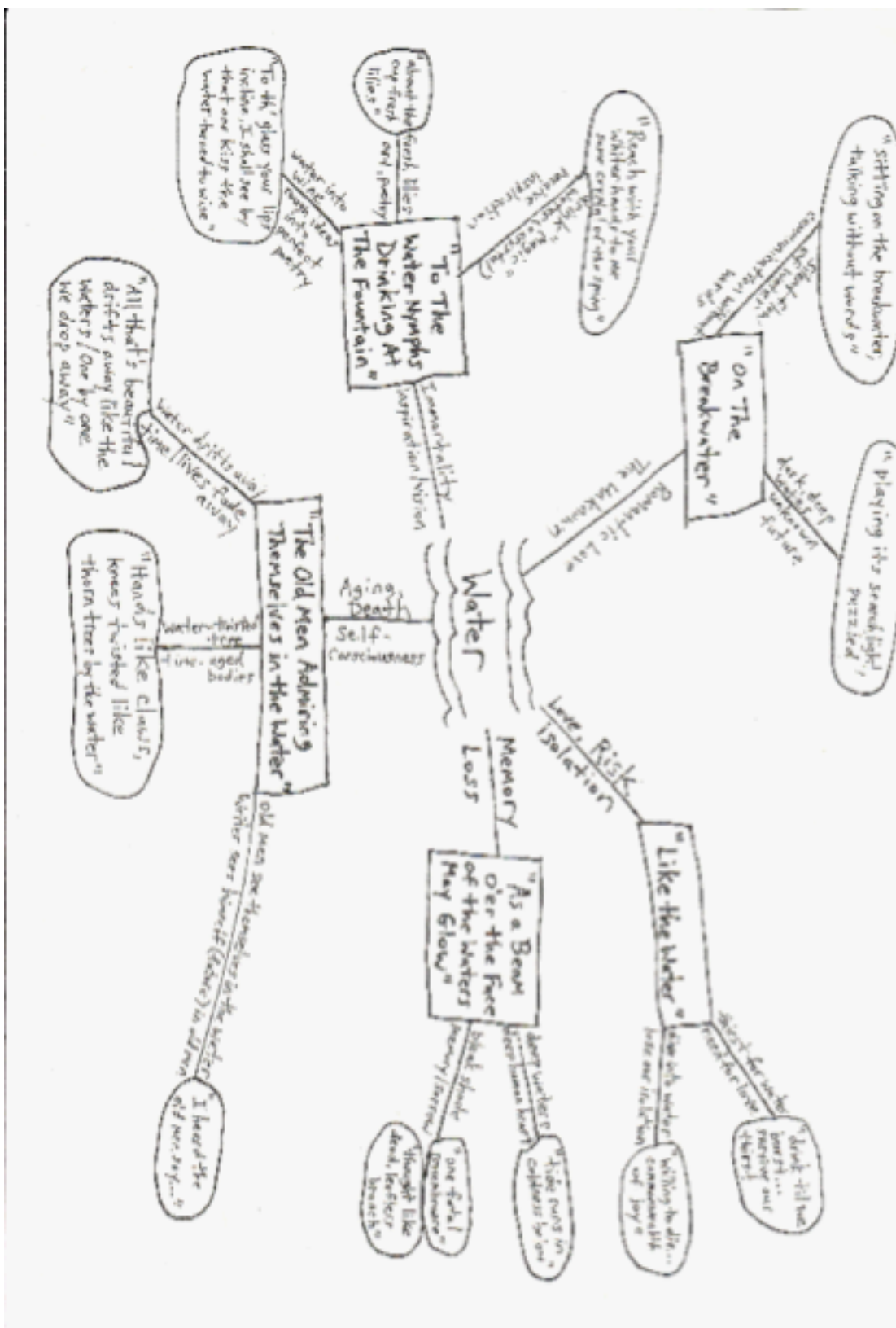


Figure 5: Group Mind-Map for "Water" Poems

Intertextual Comparisons with Japanese Poetry

To help students discover the universality of the themes, they were encouraged to search *100 Poems by 100 Poets*, a collection of classic Japanese poems with English translations. Students were asked to choose a Japanese poem with similar universal theme and similar imagery to one of their English poems. Figure 6 shows samples of student poem pairings and their comments. The complete Japanese poem is shown. All comments were in English.

Japanese Poem	English Poem	Student Comment
<p>Color of the flower Has already faded away, While in idle thoughts</p> <p>My life passes vainly by, As I watch the long rains fall.</p>	<p>“Nothing Gold Can Stay”</p>	<p>These poems both use flower to show themes of aging and mortality. The color of flower fading is like his life passing vainly. I think he feels no purpose in his life.</p>
<p>Oh, the foot-drawn trail Of the mountain-pheasant's tail Drooped like down-curved branch! Through this long, long-dragging night Must I lie in bed alone?</p>	<p>“Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening”</p>	<p>I think both of these poems express isolation. Both writers feel alone. The writer in the Japanese poem is lying still and can only think, but the writer in the English poem has a purpose so he doesn't feel lonely.</p>
<p>Like a driven wave, Dashed by fierce winds on a rock, So am I: alone</p> <p>And crushed upon the shore, Remembering what has been.</p>	<p>“Dreamland”</p>	<p>The waters breaking is an image of death in both poems. Both poems are about death. Death is peaceful like a “charmed sleep” in the English poem, but its violent and crushes the man in the Japanese poem. Japanese feeling is darker about death than English.</p>
<p>Like a mariner Sailing over Yura's strait With his rudder gone:</p> <p>Where, over the deep of love, The end lies, I do not know.</p>	<p>“As a Beam O'er the Face of the Waters May Glow”</p>	<p>In both poems deep water is a metaphor for deep human heart. But in the Japanese poem, it is about the writer's future with his love. In the English poem, the deep human heart is full of memories and loss in the past.</p>

Figure 6: Student Pairings of English and Japanese Poems

Analysis of the student reading logs, online forum exchanges, and group mind-maps showed that these activities were effective in increasing student discussion and improving understanding of metaphors and their role in introducing universal themes into poetry. Table 1 shows an increase in student satisfaction with the poetry learning overall (44% to 97%).

Table 1: Year 1 and Year 2 Survey Results

Survey Statement	I could understand the metaphors in the poem(s).			Overall, I was satisfied with poetry activities		
	Activity Type	Auden (Group) (brain-Storming)	Pair Poem Exchange (Student-Selected Poem)	Understood Universal Theme	Year 1	Year 2
Strongly Agree		9%	5%	7%	11%	54%
Moderately Agree		64%	18%	20%	33%	43%
Moderately Disagree		24%	53%	56%	60%	3%
Strongly Disagree		2%	24%	18%	9%	0%
MEAN		2.8	2.02	2.16	2.47	3.51
Standard Deviation		0.63	0.78	0.80	0.81	0.56

Table 2 shows the positive impact students reported for each of the four year-two learning activities on their understanding of metaphors and universal themes in their five poems.

Table 2: Year Four Survey Results

Survey Statement	After this activity I could understand the Metaphors (M) & Universal Themes (UT) in my group's poems. (Year 3 of study)							
	Reading Log		Online Discussion		Literature Circles		Group Mind-Map	
Metaphor/ Univ. Themes	M	UT	M	UT	M	UT	M	UT
Strongly Agree	11%	14%	23%	34%	43%	57%	54%	66%
Moderately Agree	60%	54%	66%	57%	57%	43%	43%	34%
Moderately Disagree	29%	31%	9%	9%	0%	0%	3%	0%
Strongly Disagree	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
MEAN	2.83	2.83	3.11	3.26	3.43	3.57	3.52	3.66
Standard Deviation	0.62	0.66	0.58	0.61	0.50	0.50	0.56	0.48

Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest that the increasing the variety of collaborative learning exercises improved students' understanding and enjoyment of the poems. The group brainstorming activities and student-created metaphors in year one of the study proved useful in improving understanding of metaphors in the Auden poem, but did little to aid students' understanding of their self-selected poem. Following the expanded role of collaborative learning in year two, survey results showed a steady increase over the four learning activities in the percentage of students saying they understood the metaphors and universal themes in their set of poems. Student's produced many purposeful, referential English questions concerning metaphor in their reading logs and online exchanges, receiving detailed responses in English and to a smaller extent Japanese. All seven groups were able to produce a mind-map that addressed the interplay of metaphor, imagery and universal themes in their five poems. Finally, the students'

ability to identify similarities of metaphor and theme between an English and Japanese poem suggests the project enabled students to recognize the universality of themes and metaphors across the two cultures.

There are a number of limitations and areas of concern with the current study. The small number of students in the study limits the ability to infer from the findings a general accessibility of English poetry for EFL students. And while the samples of students' reading log comments, online exchanges and group mind-maps were representative of the class as a whole, the limited scope of the study precludes a fuller presentation of student work which would strengthen their value as empirical data. Future research should present the students' personal connection compositions and evidence of noticing and interpretive hypotheses of metaphorical language in fuller detail.

Author note

William Collins is Associate Professor at Nagasaki University's Center for Language Studies. His research interests include storytelling, literature and language learning, evaluating speaking skills and developing an online corpus of classic literature.

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100 Poems by 100 Poets <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/japanese/hyakunin/>

Appendix: List of Thematically-Linked Poems

Love Poems

Opal Amy Lowell

Bread and Music Conrad Aiken

i carry your heart with me E.E. Cummings

Poem 22 Emily Dickinson

I Am Not Yours Sara Teasdale

Family Poems

The Song of Old Mother William Butler Yeats

Those Winter Sundays Robert Hayden

Nature – the Gentlest Mother is Emily Dickinson

Mother to Son Langston Hughes

The Mother Gwendolyn Brooks

Flower Poems

Nothing Gold Can Stay Robert Frost

To The Virgins, To Make Much of Time Robert Herrick

Music, when soft voices die Percy Bysshe Shelley

There is another sky Emily Dickinson

I wandered lonely as a cloud William Wordsworth

Water Poems

Like The Water Wendell Berry

On The Breakwater Carl Sandburg

As a Beam O'er the Face of the Waters May Glow Thomas Moore

The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water William Butler Yeats

To The Water-Nymphs Drinking At The Fountain Robert Herrick

Star Poems

Stars Robert Frost

Lost Star Rabindranath Tagore

When the Shy Star Goes Forth in Heaven James Joyce

Stars, Songs, Faces Carl Sandburg

Lightly stepped a yellow star Emily Dickinson

Falling Stars Rainer Maria Rilke

Trees/Woods Poems

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening Robert Frost

The Road Not Taken Robert Frost

A Girl Ezra Pound

On a Tree Fallen Across the Road Robert Frost

A Poison Tree William Blake

Death Poems

Dreamland Christina Rossetti

Fire and Ice Robert Frost

For Whom the Bell Tolls John Donne

Growing Old Matthew Arnold

I Have Loved Flowers That Fade Robert Bridges