

*Literature in practice***Crossing Borders: Going from Poetry to News before Coming Back**

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Japanese literature in English translation can be an engaging tool for language learning. This article describes the implementation of a lesson plan for Osaki Sayaka's *Aboo* (2019), a poem about a tortoise who escapes from the zoo, in a poetry course for university students. It includes activities to support students as they read, discuss, and analyze texts before writing their own poems. In the reading portion of the lesson, students focus on understanding context clues, and in the discussion section, students make connections between the poem and their previous experiences. In addition to reading the poem, students read a related news article and analyze both texts for content and form. Finally, students compose original poems based on recent news stories. Using Japanese literature in English translation is an effective way to engage students while working toward course goals.

Key words: Japanese literature, poetry, writing, creativity, pedagogy, graphic organizers

Japanese literature in English translation can be used as part of language or content classes. By reading literature in translation, students can develop an awareness that “their local culture exists far beyond their local context” (Thomas, 2014). Furthermore, these literary texts may be culturally familiar to the students. *Aboo*, a poem written in Japanese by Osaki Sayaka and translated into English by Jeffrey Angles (2019), was studied as part of a poetry course at a Japanese university. Within this particular class, some students were amazed to discover that contemporary Japanese poetry is translated into other languages and read by people around the world. This poem is about a tortoise named Aboo who escapes from the zoo and is based on a true story from Okayama prefecture in 2017, so students’ possible recollection of this event could help them interpret the poem. This article describes my experience implementing the lesson plan “The body escaping confinement” (Asymptote for Educators, 2019). As part of this lesson, students read and analyzed not only the poem *Aboo* but also a newspaper article about a tortoise escaping from the zoo. To complete text analysis, students used a graphic organizer, noting the similarities and differences

between the two texts, and then crafted their own poems based on recent human-interest news stories.

Background

Students enrolled in this poetry course are second-year students in a policy studies department who have completed foundational reading, speaking, listening, presentation, and writing courses. These courses are part of a coordinated English curriculum and are designed to develop students’ language and intercultural communication skills, as well as to prepare them to study academic subjects in English. As a bridge between English skills courses and academic courses in English, second-year students take a special preparatory course offered by English language teachers: topics have included poetry, art history, bilingualism, behavioral economics, and film studies. Regardless of the course topic, the goals are to study a topic in English while building on previously learned English skills, participating in small-group discussions, and developing research skills. Students are required to take one of these courses, but they are able to choose their preferred topic from the list of courses offered that semester. In

principle, this means that students enrolled in the poetry course have some level of interest in literature. Many students remarked in an introductory survey to the course that although they had experience reading poems in Japanese, they did not have much experience reading them in English. The class met once per week for 90 minutes and had an average class size of 25 students. The lesson described in this article was conducted during a makeup class near the end of the semester.

When reading Japanese literature, Japanese students may become more absorbed in reading, analyzing, and discussing the texts. Tanaka (2015) found that when students can use their background knowledge, "... students gain confidence to voice their opinion and lead the conversation." This idea of increased confidence is also stated by Teranishi and Nasu (2016): "The theme or content should be familiar enough for students to make inferences concerning their contextual aspects; this ensures that their reading and analysis are meaningful and enjoyable, and it also boosts confidence."

Japanese poems in English translation have been incorporated into a variety of university-level language classes in Japan. Tanaka (2015) used English translations of tanka poems by Yosano Akiko, a Japanese poet who lived from 1878-1942. During class time, students led discussions about the poems and their translations. Teranishi & Nasu (2016) used English translations of haiku poems in the classroom. The students read the poems and then used them as models for writing their own haiku or other types of poetry with metaphors. Short stories in translation can be utilized as well; for example, Hourdequin (2015) read a short story by Murakami Haruki with his students, and the majority said that they wanted to read the English text before reading the Japanese translation.

These Japanese literary texts in English translation provided a different experience for students from literature originally written in English because students may be familiar with the cultural aspects of Japanese literature, and the original text could be used for linguistic support, if needed.

Reading: Understanding contextual clues

Students' prior knowledge is an important consideration, and there are a variety of activities that can be used to activate previous experience with a topic (Brown, 2001; Clanfield & Duncan, 2004; Zull, 2002). Because the setting of the poem *Aboo* is a zoo, the pre-reading portion of the lesson focused on two questions: What

comes to mind when you hear the word "zoo"? and What do you think about zoos? By discussing these questions, students' schemata on these topics opened, thereby fostering accessibility and encouraging curiosity about the contents of the poem.

The purpose of the next stage in the lesson was to read and understand the poem. In class, students listened to the teacher read the poem aloud and then they read the poem aloud with a partner, alternating stanzas. Students read the poem again silently, and they checked the meaning of unknown vocabulary by asking questions or using a dictionary. Examples of commonly unknown words included the following low frequency words: horseflies, northern hemisphere, spangle butterfly, tenaciousness, and righteousness. When defining the term "spangle butterfly", it was more effective to show a picture of the butterfly or provide the Japanese translation (*agehachō*) than referring to a definition in English. "Northern hemisphere" is a particularly important word for understanding the subject of the poem because it alludes to the shape of the tortoise's shell.

In fact, the word "tortoise" is not written in the poem, so to deepen understanding, students reread and discussed ideas with classmates, before guessing to whom "you" refers in this poem. The teacher can remind students of the warm-up questions which provide a hint that the poem is about a zoo animal. Although giving a hint limits the range of possible answers (Mason and Giovanelli, 2017), students were still engaged in the process of discovering the identity of the animal. To scaffold the process of reading between the lines, the students reread one stanza at a time and the teacher wrote clues on the board for further support (see Table 1). For example, the lines "... horseflies landed / On the northern hemisphere that is your back" suggest the animal's shape. Similarly, these lines provide further information about its form: "Your thick legs marched through shadows cast / By the highest branches of the cherry trees / As you munched upon the grass that tickles your throat". Finally, lines from the last stanza show readers the animal's movement, "The slowness of your pace might have been distressing". After understanding the meaning of these clues, students usually infer that the poem is about a turtle or tortoise. Finally, students referred to the author note accompanying the poem which states that Aboo is the name of a tortoise who escaped from a zoo in Okayama Prefecture in the summer of 2017.

Table 1*Understanding contextual clues in the poem*

Stanza	Quotation	Key Question
2	"... horseflies landed / On the northern hemisphere that is your back"	What shape is the animal?
6	"Your thick legs marched through shadows cast / ... / As you munched upon the grass that tickles your throat"	Is the animal tall or short? What does the animal eat?
8	"The slowness of your pace might have been distressing"	Is the animal fast or slow?

Discussion: Making connections

After reading the poem, open-ended discussion questions were asked to encourage students to explore ideas and emotions related to the poem. The discussion fostered meaningful connections as students related their experiences with those presented in the text. The following questions guided the discussion:

- What came to mind when reading this poem? What are your favorite lines?
- Does this poem relate to anything you discussed about zoos at the beginning of class? Does it relate to anything you have previously studied?
- Does this poem remind you of any other stories you have read or heard?
- What feelings or emotions do you think this poem evokes? What themes do you think this poem addresses?

In response to the first question, some students relayed their experiences seeing animals at the zoo or hearing about this incident when they were high school students. One student replied that this poem reminded him of the chimes ringing from public speakers at around 5:00 p.m. to tell children to go back home for the night. If he did not go home, then his parents came

to the local park to retrieve him and take him back home. The student related this experience to the part of the poem when the father and son find Aboo in a nearby forest and then return him to the zoo. It is as if the tortoise's play time is over. In this way, students explored personal connections to the poem and actively participated in the discussion with their peers.

Subsequent discussion questions revisited the warm-up discussion and reviewed previously learned course material. Asking students to compare their ideas about zoos from the warm-up discussion with the ideas about zoos expressed in the poem was the starting point. Furthermore, students revisited material learned in previous lessons; in this case, they had already studied literary devices, so they recognized that the poem is written free verse, has stanzas of varying lengths, and repetition of the line "Came from outside before going back." The writer also ascribes thoughts and feelings to the tortoise in the text, and the students were able to recognize it from the following lines: "But deep in your jawbone you knew" and "In your docile belief that the ground that goes on endlessly." By revisiting previous material, students consciously made connections between old and new information.

To draw attention to the connection between texts, students were asked if they could relate anything in this poem with another poem, story, or text that they are

familiar with in English, Japanese, or another language. Key questions were as follows: Do you know any other texts about tortoises, zoos, or escaped animals? Students might connect the poem to other folk tales with turtle characters, such as *The Tortoise and the Hare* or *Urashima Taro* (a Japanese folk tale about a fisherman who rescues a turtle and is rewarded by the princess for his actions). Students might also notice references to nature, such as cherry trees, and give examples of other texts that include cherry trees.

The final discussion question prompted students to talk about what themes they think the poem addresses. The final lines of the poem are “The slowness of your steps might have been distressing / But never did you doubt the righteousness of a single step.” Students guessed that these lines communicate the poem’s theme, referred to as “we can do anything” by one student. Others paraphrased the poem’s theme as “making small steps forward” or “believing in ourselves” which students thought were lessons that they could take away from the poem.

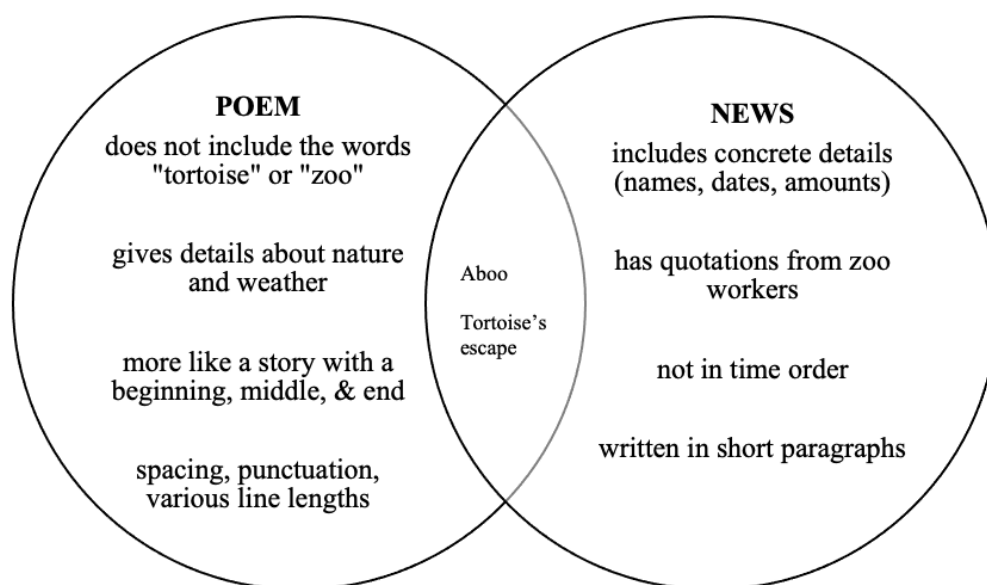
If it is relevant to the aims of the course, teachers could have students read the poem in Japanese and do further extension activities related to literary translation.

Analysis: Completing a graphic organizer

After reading the poem, students read a newspaper article from *The Japan Times*, “Giant tortoise on the run no more” (Kikuchi, 2017). This newspaper article is about the incident of a tortoise escaping from the zoo, which is referred to in the author’s note as the inspiration for the poem. In the text analysis activity, students focused on rereading both texts and investigating the structure and content in order to become more familiar with their respective conventions (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2004). Students were given the focus question, “What similarities and differences between the poem and the news article can you find?” In order to record their answers, students completed a Venn Diagram with two overlapping circles on which they wrote notes. The characteristics of the poem were noted on the left circle, and the characteristics of the article in the right circle, with the shared characteristics written in the middle where the two circles overlap (Figure 1). Graphic organizers or concept maps, such as Venn diagrams, are one effective learning strategy for connecting various sources of information, as outlined by Lang (2016). In this way, students visualized ideas, and they made connections not only between the two texts but also between previous knowledge and newly learned information.

Figure 1

Venn Diagram (student exercise)



Students identified differences between the two texts in both content and form. One dissimilar point between the two is that the word “tortoise” is not written in the poem, so readers have to infer the subject through careful reading. In addition, the poem includes imagery, such as “... shadows cast / By the highest branches of the cherry trees”. On the other hand, the news article by Kikuchi (2017) includes concrete details directly mentioning the tortoise (e.g., “female Aldabra giant tortoise named Aboo”), the names of people (e.g., “zoo worker Yoshimi Yamane”), and specific dates (e.g., “surveillance camera footage showed her [Aboo] leaving the area on Aug. 1”). However, unlike the poem, the journalistic account of events does not include any description of the natural environment.

Students also found differences related to the format and organization in the two pieces. In the poem, the line “You read the words *follow me*” includes the words “*follow me*” in italics to signify that someone communicated this idea. In contrast, in the news article, words spoken by people are inside quotation marks as can be seen in the following sentence from the article: “I feel relieved. From now on, we’ll make sure to take perfect care of our animals,” said zoo worker Yoshimi Yamane ...” (Kikuchi, 2017). Furthermore, the poem’s lines sometimes have more than one space between words and the lines are various lengths, while the newspaper article is written in prose and uses short paragraphs. As for organization, the events are arranged chronologically from beginning to end in the poem; however, events in the news article are not arranged linearly.

Writing: Creating poems about the news

Reading and writing poetry in tandem encourages students to read and write with greater purpose and enthusiasm. Koch (1990) intertwined the two through the concept of “poetry ideas,” an approach in which students write poems that are similar in some way to the poems that they have read in class. In this case, after having read both the poem and the news article, students were invited to create poems about current events. In order to select a topic for their poems, students used research skills learned in a previous English course: they brainstormed ideas, identified key search terms, and evaluated online search results before choosing a news article to read. Students had autonomy to select a topic of their choice for this assignment. Because the poem *Aboo* is based on a human-interest story, many students selected topics from the 2019 news cycle, such as the

Japanese horse, Master Fencer, in the Kentucky Derby, the Olympic ticket lottery, or the beginning of the Reiwa Era. Some students chose to focus on other types of news stories, such as recent natural disasters.

After selecting and reading their chosen news article, students highlighted key points before listing their thoughts and feelings and imagining details in preparation for writing their poems. Because students had already made connections with the poem *Aboo* based in Japanese culture and language, they exhibited greater confidence and willingness to write about a local news event in English. The poems included a variety of literary devices and conveyed familiar news events in fresh and interesting ways. These poems were written as part of a homework assignment to be shared in a subsequent lesson, if time permitted.

Conclusion

This lesson offered several benefits for Japanese university students. Because students read a poem that was translated from Japanese to English, and the cultural context was familiar, they were able to use background knowledge to help them understand contextual clues and interpret the poem. Students read a newspaper article about the Okayama Zoo incident and also another article of their choosing which gave them the opportunity to analyze how information is conveyed differently across genres. By writing original poems, students integrated what they learned about poetry and news to express information in new and creative ways. All of these activities corresponded with the course goals to develop language, discussion, and research skills. By using contemporary Japanese literature in English translation, reading and writing poems became more enjoyable activities because they were more closely related to the students’ lives. Students became increasingly engaged in the learning process because they had multiple opportunities throughout the lesson to think creatively and express ideas in new ways.

Author Biography

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