Flexing the Four Skills: Structured Poetry for the English Classroom in Japan

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1. Introduction:

Poetry surrounds us. We hear it in songs, we quote it in speeches, we use it in everything from television commercials to last words and epitaphs. If we are lucky, we also study it in school with a teacher who is passionate about life and words. The research done on the benefits of poetry to students (including ESL/EFL students), is overwhelming and overwhelmingly positive: a search on the internet using the words "poetry in the classroom" produced over 22,000,000 results. Many of these results include free, searchable databases wherein one can listen to a poem being read aloud (often by the original author). Never before has so much poetry been so available to such a large audience. Yet, too many teachers are still convinced that class time is better spent on "serious" test-preparation topics, not something as "extra-curricular" as poetry. Perhaps they do not have time to read the research. Perhaps they had a bad experience with poetry as a student. Whatever the reason, they are doing a disservice to their students and to themselves, by keeping poetry out of their classrooms. This report is for those teachers.

Based on several poetry classes I have taught, this report offers a simple way to introduce poetry, rhyming schemes, and three structured/patterned poem types: the Shape poem, the Diamante poem, and the Acrostic poem. Also included are samples of student-generated poems, suggestions for adapting the activities to specific age groups, and a bibliography of books and websites on poetry in the ESL/EFL classroom for further study and inspiration. It is my hope that this will provide a painless new path for teachers who might otherwise ignore poetry altogether. Starting with even one or two poem activities may lead them to believe, as I do, that "pattern poems not only allow for practical grammatical structures but also turned out to be useful vehicles for a host of other purposes: vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, speaking, listening, reading, language awareness, critical thinking, literary appreciation, and obviously, writing." (Holmes and Moulton, 2001).

2. Introducing Poetry to Students:

"Innovative and Creative Thinking" is the title of my section of the Culture Studies

course in the Department of English Language and Literature of this college. In an effort to get an idea of what the students already know about poetry, I poll them casually at the beginning of the class. My most recent course was part of a three-week teacher rotation system between five native speakers of English, so I taught the same class ten different times with a total of approximately 110 students. The table below shows the questions I asked and the responses I received. *Except for 100% answers, results are not exact.

Table 1 —Poetry Introduction Questions

QUESTION:	Yes
1．Do you like music?	100%
2．Can you name a Japanese song?	100%
3．Can you name a foreign song?	80～90%
4．Have you studied Japanese poetry in school?	100%
5．Have you studied a foreign poem in school?	10%
6．Can you name a Japanese poet?	100%
7．Can you name a foreign poet?	0%
8．Can you recite a Japanese poem?	6%
9．Can you recite a foreign poem?	4%
10．Do you like poetry?	2%

Asking if students like music may seem non-productive as the answer is almost always going to be near 100%. My reason for asking about music is two-fold, however: it engages even the most reluctant student for a time and provides a wonderful opportunity to remind them that the songs they love are quite often a poem which has been set to music. Interestingly, among my current students, the few who said they could recite a Japanese poem simply said the name of the poet, but the students who said they could recite a foreign poem recited the first lines: one recited "Twinkle, Twinkle, little star...", and another said "I have a Dream!" in a powerful voice, making everyone laugh. The last question, "Do you like poetry?" caused a lot of shoulder shrugging, non-committal answers and two very tentative raised hands. The majority shook their heads.

After polling students, I write a general definition of poetry on the board, adjusting it for the age and English comprehension level of my students. This is the definition I used for my Junior College students: "Poetry is a type of literature in which the sound and meaning of language are combined to create ideas and feelings. People are often attracted to poetry by its sounds and rhythm patterns." (Lamb and Johnson, 2003). Unless there are questions, I do not generally spend much time trying to define poetry.

The majority of my introduction focuses on rhyming schemes and how to work out if a poem makes use of one. Quoting from the print I created for class and used most recently:

> Some poems rhyme, but not all. Some poems follow a "pattern" called a "*rhyming scheme*". Each sound at the end of a line is given a letter. The first sound is "A", the next new sound is "B", and so on. For example, "Funny Happy Birthday", below, has an "A-A-B-A" pattern.

Students all know the short "Happy Birthday" song in English, so after singing it together once as a class, I teach them this silly version of it I learned in childhood:

> Happy Birthday to you,
> Happy Birthday to you,
> You look like a monkey...
> And you smell like one, too!

After singing, I write the A-A-B-A rhyming scheme next to the appropriate lines and then encourage students two work on a more challenging poem (see Appendix for entire poem):

> "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" (Robert Frost, 1923)
> has a much more complex pattern. Can you write out the pattern?
> Work with your friend.

Over and over, with a variety of age groups, I have witnessed students work through this famous poem happily, with several students raising their hands to answer when I call on someone to provide part of the rhyming scheme (A-A-B-A/B-B-C-B/C-C-D-C/D-D-D-D). The poem is long enough to challenge older, more able students, and yet contains enough simple words that younger students do not get overwhelmed. In my classes there is often a palpable sense of accomplishment in finishing this task. It is often at this point in class when students who were non-committal about liking poetry at the beginning are paying more attention. They never expect a silly song, and they enjoy learning something new, easy, and interesting about rhyming in English poems. With younger learners I encourage clapping for emphasis.

At the end of my introduction to poetry, I read Frost's poem aloud to students so that they can hear the rhymes and intonation of it. Then I have them read it aloud with a partner. Finally, I explain the most literal interpretation of the poem to the students by drawing out the characters, actions and locations on the board, asking

students to try to say in Japanese what they think a certain line means before I explain it. I may give them some hints or allow a few minutes of dictionary use for better understanding.

If students are older or more advanced in English, we go through the poem yet again, discussing alternative interpretations of some of the words. I point out that the snow and woods can symbolize freedom and the unknown or a hiding place from the world. I point out how the poem sets up tension between wanting to remain looking at a lovely scene and knowing that one has responsibilities. Lastly, I explain briefly, that the repetition of "sleep" is very powerful because it can be seen to represent the ultimate sleep, "death." Students see very clearly and quickly with this poem how even simple words can create several levels of meaning.

3. The Shape Poem

A Shape Poem is a poem that describes an object and is written in the shape of that object. Richard Lanham writes, "The earliest shape poem we know of is by the Greek poet Simias of Rhodes, who flourished about 300 B.C. He wrote a poem in the shape of an axe." (Lanham, 2007). Teachers can suggest a shape or allow students to choose their own. When I teach Shape poems, I give my "Snake" poem, below, as an example, and allow students of all English levels to use their dictionaries for inspiration. Shape poems are easy to understand, fun to create, and can be repeated many times at any age level without students getting bored. They are also excellent poems for display, especially with very young learners, and always inspire discussion.

Shape poems from first year high school students: (Students selected their own themes and had approximately 15 minutes in class to work on their poems with dictionaries. Most did not finish, and finished them at home.)
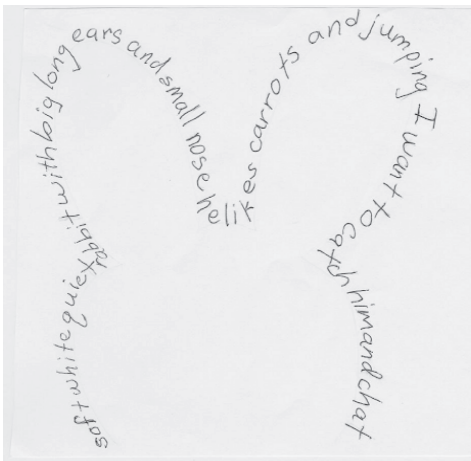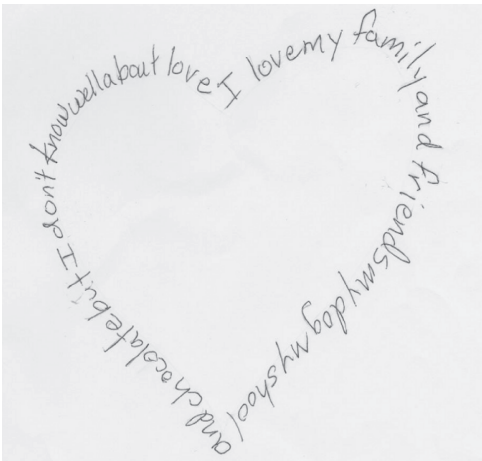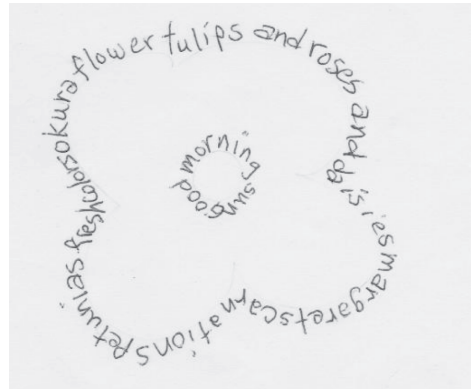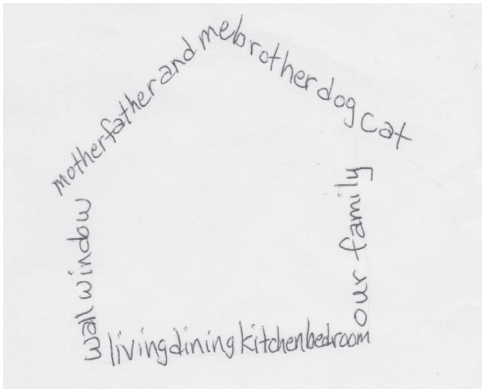
Some may wonder why people would want to create poems like this. Indeed, why have shape poems continued to keep our interest since ancient Greek times? Lanham answers, "Because we want to heal the pains of abstraction... We are asked to ponder, to keep ever in mind, the uneasy relationship between words and the objects to which they refer." (Lanham, 2007). Seeing and creating these types of poems is not only enjoyable for all age groups, it is teaching beginning students an awareness of language and the contrast between real and abstract thinking.

4. The Diamante Poem

"Diamante" is an Italian word meaning "diamond". A Diamante poem always has 7 lines and has the shape of a diamond.

<div align="center">

Dogs

Happy, Friendly

Running, Jumping, Barking

Paws, Tails, Claws, Teeth

Hiding, Avoiding, Demanding

Snobby, Skittish

Cats

</div>

(Tiedt, 2000)

Explaining how to write a Diamante poem is an excellent way to introduce, practice, or review several parts of speech (not to mention their English names, as opposed to the Japanese names which are often used throughout Junior and Senior high school in this author's experience). It also is a way to remind students that not all poetry has to rhyme. The explanation below comes from a print I have used in many of my poetry classes.

<div align="center">

Here is how to write a Diamante poem:

</div>

1st line＝One word (a thing or idea that is opposite or contrasting to line 7)

2nd line＝Two words (Adjectives, which describe line 1)

3rd line＝Three words (Action verbs ending in "-ing", that relate to line 1)

4th line＝Four words (Nouns, things. The first two relate to line 1, the second two relate to line 7)

5th line＝Three words (Action verbs, ending in "-ing", that relate to line 7)

6th line＝Two words (Adjectives, which describe line 7)

7th line＝One word (a thing or idea that is opposite or *contrasting* to line 1)

Here are some of the Diamante poems my Junior College students have written, with the exception of the last one, "Friday", which was written by a senior in high school:

<div align="center">

Summer	School
Warm, Relax	Big, Loud
Swimming, Laughing, Playing	Studying, Reading, Writing
Fruits, Ice Cream, Socks, Sweaters	Books, Pencils, TV, Couch
Sleeping, Reading, Snowing	Eating, Sleeping, Laughing
White, Cold	Warm, Nice
Winter	Home

</div>

<div style="text-align:center">

Me
Tired, Hungry
Studying, Writing, Waiting
Bag, Cell phone, Car, Smile
Driving, Chatting, Singing
Cheerful, Bright
Mother

Friday
Difficult, Boring
Writing, Writing, Writing
English Test, Math Test, Pillow, Bed
Sleeping, Sleeping, Sleeping
Wonderful, Great
Saturday

</div>

Students were not given any direction as to the themes of the Diamante poem, and had about ten minutes in class to work on them before taking them home to finish. These poems are wonderful for working on contrasts.

As with all poem styles I teach, I try to vary *how* the students write: sometimes giving them the assignment for homework, sometimes giving them plenty of time in class, and other times giving them a short amount of time, collecting the poems, and then handing them out again later, when students may have a new perspective on their original idea. John Fanselow, Professor Emeritus of Columbia University, says "if we carefully examine what we habitually do in our classes and then try to do the opposite, we may stumble upon some interesting new ways of proceeding." (Fanselow, 2010)
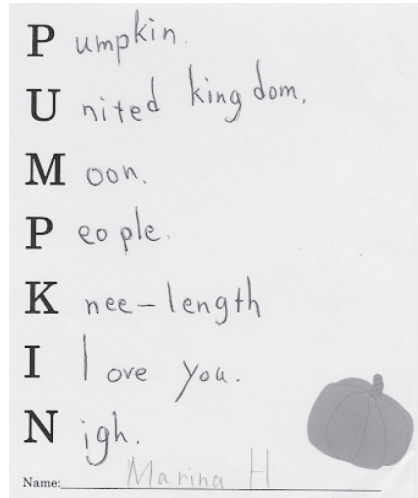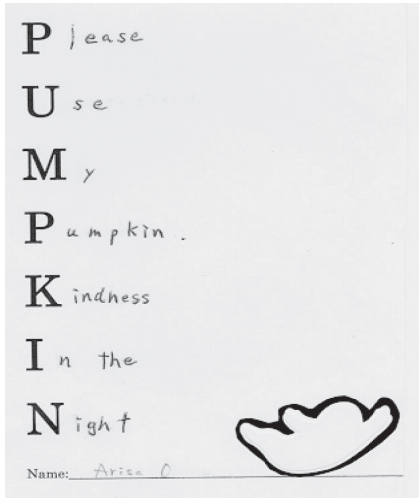
5. Acrostics:

An Acrostic poem uses the letters in a topic word to begin each line. All lines of the poem should relate to or describe the topic. Like shape poems, acrostics have been used since ancient times. When I introduce this type of poem to a class, I often write a spontaneous poem using the school name. Choosing someone famous or a word which has meaning for the students has worked best for me. Often I use a poem I once wrote about the actor Johnny Depp.
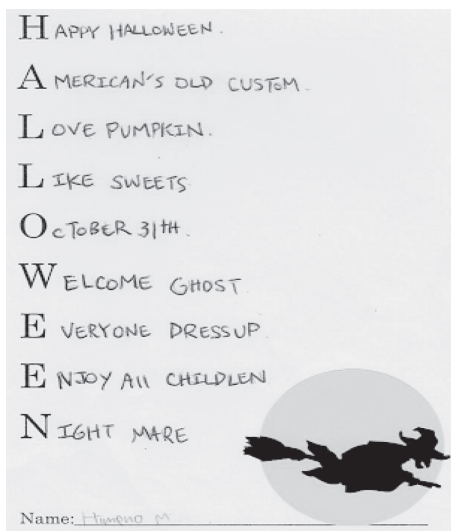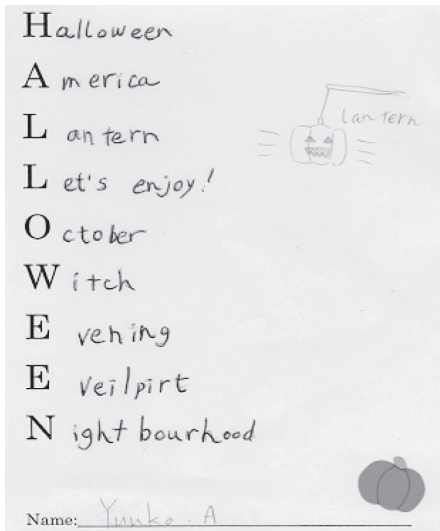
> Jumping from pirate ship to pirate ship,
>
> Oh! Look!
>
> His long pirate hair!
>
> Nobody loves him the way I do!
>
> Nobody!
>
> Yes, I am in love with a pirate.
>
> Don't laugh!
>
> Everyone wants to talk with Captain Jack with his
>
> Perfect eyes and
>
> Perfect voice!

In choosing samples of student work for this section, I thought a progression,
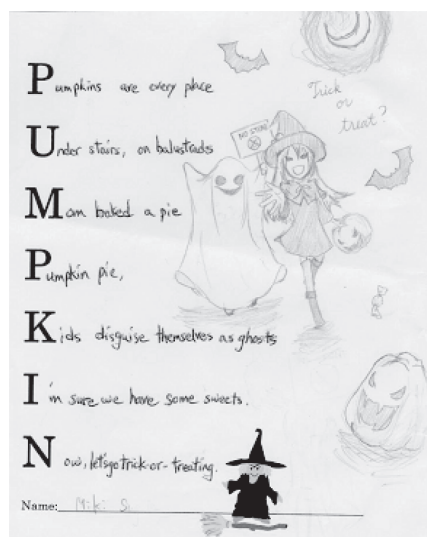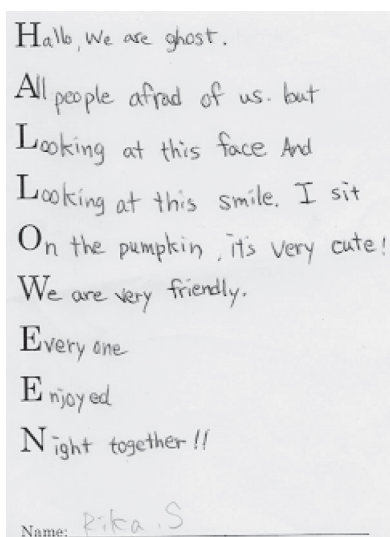
starting with first year Junior High school through Junior College students (printed with permission from students) would be most interesting:

First-year Junior High School students

P lease
U se
M y
P umpkin.
K indness
I n the
N ight
Name: Arisa O

P umpkin.
U nited kingdom.
M oon.
P eople.
K nee-length
I love you.
N igh.
Name: Marina H

Halloween
America
Lantern
Let's enjoy!
October
Witch
Evening
Veilpirt
Night bourhood
Name: Yuuko A

HAPPY HALLOWEEN.
AMERICAN'S OLD CUSTOM.
LOVE PUMPKIN.
LIKE SWEETS
OCTOBER 31th.
WELCOME GHOST
EVERYONE DRESSUP
ENJOY AII CHILDLEN
NIGHT MARE
Name: Humeno M

From second-year (left) and third-year (right) Junior High students

From first-year (left) and third-year (right) High School Students

The beauty of using this type of poem in class is that all students, from those who use just single words, to those who write complex sentences and add artwork, can enjoy expressing themselves while learning more about a foreign language.

Finally, examples from my Junior College students (printed, anonymously, with student permission). I am also including some poems from the two seasonal words I assigned in class at this Junior College : FALL and LEAVES. Students were given only five minutes in which to complete their poems, so they did not concern themselves with spelling and grammar mistakes.

1

Prepare for Halloween!

Uh...What costume should I wear?

Make people scare!

Play Pranks!

Keyword is "Trick or Treat".

I won't do anything, if you give me sweets.

Now, let's go around the city!

2

Have a wonderful night!

Are you ready?

Let's get in a Halloween costume.

Let's put make up on.

OK!

Where shall we go? It will be

Endless and

Enjoyable night!

No one can refuse our "Trick or Treat!!"

3

Food is very good.

All of them.

Like it, but you may become

Little fat.

4

Feel cold than yesterday

Autumn is my favorite season

Leaves are dyed red and yellow

Let's enjoy the Autumn leaves!

5

Pretty Face

Unique festival

Make up face

Pumpkin...I see a lot of today

Kind of people

In October, on the 31st

No, negative.

6

Happy Halloween

A lot of sweets

Laugh face

Lucky day

October 31 is Halloween

Wonderful time

Enjoy in Halloween costume

Even adults can disguise

Naïve from children

7

Fit season

Almost people like this season

Like to see colored leaves!

Like to read a lot of books!

8

Fall down the leaves on the tree

Always cool day

Look forward so seeing colored leaves

Lotta fruit ripens

9

Fall in Love

A good boyfriend

Love Letter

Love Sickness

10

Fruits are very delicious and fresh,

Apple and

Lemon is my favorite fruits

Let's eat them every day!

11

Lovely

Even go back home.

Apple is famous Company.

Vacate, Stiv Jobs

Even he impact give for many people

Stiv is a genius.

12

Love colored leaves

Everyone wants to look

Autumn only

Very beautiful view

Enjoy

So, we can be relaxed.

13

Let's

Eat out

At the restaurant today, but you should eat

Vegetables also

Even if you are not

Strict vegetarian.

14
Laugh
Everyone
And be happy
Valued you higher
Even though you don't have enough confident
Someday, dreams come true.

15
Look many colors...leaves in the fall
Every season, leaves change color
Almost people look this everyday
Very mysterious in fall
Easy for us to see
Sometime people is heal by colored leaves

Some of the more sophisticated uses of English which impressed me were the variety of vocabulary choices and the manipulation of the phrase "a lot of" in poem 8 to become "lotta", which fits the poetry structure but is a form found only in spoken English. Throughout these poems, there is a maturity in theme choice as well, compared to junior and senior high students. Poem 9 is about falling in love and poem 11 addresses the very recent death of Steve Jobs, both topics showing a growing awareness of the world and the individual's relationship to others.

6. Conclusion:

This report attempted, through personal example, to show that introducing poetry in to any language classroom can be painless, fun, and successful *without sacrificing useful language study for "tests"*. With so many free classroom plans available, not to mention multiple websites where students and teachers can listen to poems, encouraging creative language learning can be accomplished with a bare minimum of effort. Students everywhere, but especially in Japan, are required to memorize endless vocabulary lists and sentence patterns, so why not give them a rigorous mental workout with memorable, culturally meaningful poetry? Beginning with the three kinds of structured poetry covered here, Shape poems, the Diamante, and the Acrostic, all four skills, most notably the difficult writing component of a foreign language, can be practiced in a low-stress, personally meaningful manner. Small successes with language learning can result in longer attention spans and the tangible, visible results of creating a poem can give students proof of their developing abilities. Explore the books and websites listed in the bibliography. Feel free to copy and use any of my original poems and print ideas written here. Set aside five or ten minutes and try something new with poetry, even if it is an assignment to use a particular grammar point from the lesson as many times as possible in a ten-line poem. Your students may balk a bit at first, but you can personalize your lessons to suit your classes, and I believe that the next time they are presented with a chance to read or learn about poetry, they may not be so quick to dismiss it.

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8. Appendix:

Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening —by Robert Frost
Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.