Using Japanese poetry in the English classroom
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Quick guide

Key words: Japanese poetry, reading, creative writing, speaking, translation, Mitsuo Aida
Learner English level: Beginner to advanced
Learner maturity: Junior high school to adult
Preparation time: 30 minutes
Activity time: 60 minutes
Materials: A two-page handout and as many Mitsuo Aida poems as there are students in the class

Introduction

Mitsuo Aida (1924–1991), the poet, is well known among Japanese students. A prolific writer (and calligrapher) of short, simple, meditative poems, Aida’s work can be seen not only in books (such as Ningendomono “Because We Are Human”), but also on commercial calendars, notebooks, postcards, framed wall hangings, and even food products. The Japanese read Aida almost by default, simply by seeing his poems dotted about their cultural landscape.

The following activity involves several different skills all in a communicative framework: translating poetry, composing original English poems, reading poetry out loud, and critically assessing it. This activity can, therefore, be applied to a wide range of teaching contexts, such as: reading, creative writing or oral communication classes, literary studies, translation courses, or even as a way of teaching culture.

Preparation

Step 1: Consult your nearest library or search the Internet to get hold of as many different Aida poems (in the original Japanese) as there are students in your class. The Mitsuo Aida Museum website is a place to start: <www.mitsuoaida.com>.
Step 2: Photocopy the poems and cut them up so that one piece of paper displays one poem.
Step 3: Prepare a worksheet as per the Appendix.

Procedure

Step 1: Have students sit in pairs.
Step 2: Have pairs do the discussion questions (see Activity 1 of the Appendix) to focus them on the topic.
Step 3: Give one poem to each pair and have them translate it into English and write the translation on one of their handouts.
Step 4: Hand out a second poem and have the pairs repeat Step 3 (only this time they write the translation on the other person’s handout).
Step 5: Tell the students to work alone. Each student has to compose an original English poem on the handout in the style of Aida.
Step 6: Direct the students’ attention to the class survey table on the worksheet. Tell them to walk around the classroom and read their two poems to as many different classmates as possible.
Step 7: Explain that their classmates have to guess which poem is the real Aida composition. If the respondent guesses correctly, the reader circles “got it” in the survey table; if the respondent guesses incorrectly, the reader circles “didn’t get it”.
Step 8: Allow students as much time as needed to carry out their poetry readings and surveys.
Step 9: When finished, have everyone calculate the number of “didn’t get it” responses they received. This student is declared the “Best Poet in the Class” since their composition was most often mistaken for an Aida original.
Step 10: (Optional) Have the champion poet read out their masterpiece to the class.

Conclusion

Two defining characteristics of Aida’s work – its brevity (typically 3 or 4 lines) and simplicity (the lexis of everyday things) – ensure that a junior high school beginner can engage with the materials just as productively and enjoyably as an advanced university English major. Thus, the lesson is applicable across a range of proficiency levels, just as it is applicable across a range of subject areas.
Students will be surprised and excited by the choice of Aida, and the interactive nature of the activities ensures that there is a great deal of oral output in addition to the written output that is necessitated by translating and composing poems. The essential "Japanese-ness" of the poems also triggers reflection on how language is embedded with (and within) cultural perspectives, and the extent to which these perspectives can be translated.

Appendix
The Mitsuo Aida poetry handout can be found at <jalt-publications.org/tlt/myshare/resources/0904b.pdf>.
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**ACTIVITY 1:**
With a partner, discuss the questions below:

- Is there any Mitsuo Aida poetry in your house? If so, where is it?
- Are there any other places that you have seen Mitsuo Aida's poetry? Where?
- Do you like his poetry? Why or why not?
- How would you describe his poetry to a non-Japanese person?
- Can you think of any of his poems from memory? If so, try to tell one or two to your partner.

**ACTIVITY 2:**
You and your partner will receive a Mitsuo Aida poem. Translate it to English together. Partner A should write the English version in the Poem 1 box below. Partner B, don't write anything yet.

When you are finished, ask for a second poem. Translate it with your partner. Partner A, don't write anything this time. Partner B, write the translation in the Poem 2 box.

**ACTIVITY 3:**
Now it's time to create your own poem. Do this task by yourself. Try to write a poem in English that sounds like a Mitsuo Aida poem. Write it in the Poem 2 box below.

**Poem 1**


**Poem 2**


**ACTIVITY 4:**
For this activity you just need this paper and a pen or pencil. Walk around the classroom and read your two poems to different people. They have to guess which one is the real Mitsuo Aida poem.

Use the table below. If your classmate correctly identifies the real Aida poem, circle “got it”. If they choose incorrectly, circle “didn’t get it”.

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The student who achieves the highest “didn’t get it” total will be declared the BEST POET IN THE CLASS.