

# Judging the Tenth Akita International Haiku Contest

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## Introduction

Creative literature texts include poetry, fiction, film, and drama. Creative writing is an academic discipline that is deeply established in the field of humanities. In comparison to nonfiction genres such as journalism, report writing, grammatical translation of texts, and essays written for standardized tests of language competence--creative writing is underrepresented as a resource to enhance the foreign language learning classroom. This article discusses the evaluation of haiku poetry written in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by university students in Japan.

## 1. The Problem At Hand

I have found that motivating Japanese university students to write in English can be a challenge for some students. The boundaries of classroom instruction of foreign language writing in my classes usually lies between the grammatical translating of a few sentences to the formation of five paragraphs for a nonfictional essay. Students who are asked to compose poetry need courage to sail beyond those basic shores.

### 1.1 Definitions

Reticence can keep students from embarking on the adventure of composing a short haiku or a long epic poem. The concept of self-efficacy refers to the belief a person has towards their ability to successfully complete certain tasks (Bandura, 1997). This self-assessment is influenced by both experience and by environmental factors, along with perceptions of failure, anxiety, and self-doubt.

### 1.2 What Other Researchers Have Discovered

Hanauer (2014) introduced creative writing in the second language (L2) classroom to help learners appreciate English as a communicative tool and to explore their L2 voice and identity. The haiku poet Maley (2009) and the applied linguist Zhao (2015) both suggested that creative writing leads to greater motivation. Writing by English language learners is itself a kind of literature. I have tried various methods such as workshopping and asking students to revise poems, short stories, travel writing and excerpts from novels that I give to them as prompts.

Students can be introduced to the creative writing of their own English haiku as a means of acquiring and communicating English. In my 25 years of judging haiku contests around the world I have observed the remarkable ability of haiku to transmit itself from Japan in essential ways, by overleaping language, cultural and historical differences. One of the debates regarding the conceptualization of culture hinges on the question

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**Keywords:** haiku, English, literature, time, temporality

about where it is supposed to be shared: at a national level, or at the individual and situational level, or something in between? Gilbert (2003) queried “Can a global haiku community be created?” It had been argued by Anakiev (2002) that literature is fundamentally a regional art form, best nurtured on local ground, by local organizations. This comment begged the issue: should the concept of “global haiku” be resisted, or even spurned? In defense of a national level approach, Minkov and Hofstede (2012) claimed that distinctions between cultures are useful when comparing nations. The notion of national cultures seems plausible because the popular perception of national characters does exist.

There is causal relationship between collective efficacy and culture. Bandura (2002) cautioned, however, against oversimplifying cross-cultural comparisons that mistakenly equate collective-efficacy beliefs with collectivism. Perhaps measures of cultural values can be improved by taking into account the social environment in which people “do” culture. In this paper that means the way that students in Japan hesitate to compose haiku in their second language. This social environment is often changeable and fluid, but the social relationships within it are relatively stable. According to Chiu (2010), within-community cultural behavior is constrained not just by individual beliefs, but also by the perceived beliefs and actions of others in one’s cultural group and in particular by those with whom one interacts frequently.

### **1.3 Background**

In the Eighth Akita International Haiku Contest most of the student entries followed the traditions of modernist haikuists in subject, poetics, and syllable format. A few entries tried new formulations and creatively flashed cutting-edge styles. The soothing traditional haiku compositions chose endearing themes of family, respect-for-the-aged, and gentle snowflakes. As an example, note this winning haiku by Rachel He.

Looking through photos  
Recalling happy times  
Wrinkled hands turn pages

“Looking through photos” is a delightful poem penned in 17 syllables on 3 lines as suggested by the contest organizers. Though there was not a season word, a winter scene of seclusion can be imagined by the time the third line is read that reveals a caring haikuist.

A few creative minds composed disruptive innovations that shook up the contest with themes of fire, wind, salt and deforestation. Note this co-winning haiku by Tsugoshi Toshiaki from Seifu Nankai High School.

bonfire  
darkness gorging  
flare

The “bonfire” was first presented on one line and strikes fear in the reader who imagines a sudden bright light in the night.

In the Ninth Akita International Haiku Contest that was held in 2020, Miho Kuroki, a first-year student at The International University of Kagoshima was selected by the judges for the top ranking Special Award.

Autumn cuckoo  
stay warm with me here  
as long as you can

The student explained in the classroom and in a writing journal that the cuckoo is known as a summer bird. Time passes though, so she focused on the autumn bird and she felt the arrival of deepening autumn in her heart when she penned the poem in October. The young haikuist wanted the reader to experience these feelings too. The student was keenly aware of the natural rhythms of time toward the latter half of the year. Haiku can remind people of the preciousness of the moment. The Japanese student's haiku was judged as the best because it focused on a milestone, a seasonal demarcation yet it described a moment of time in everyday life. It is an individual response, but was considered representative of a Japanese culture that tends to focus on these transient moments of daily life.

Yuri Fukushige, a first-year student at The International University of Kagoshima penned the following haiku on one line:

Black cat looks as the clock strikes 4:00. I'm afraid of the dark.

This is a creative piece of writing as it is a haiku that seemed to the judges to speak to superstitions and feelings of fear. When interviewed, the young writer said, "it was a very good experience. The last sentence was used from the hit song "Life" by Des'ree, a singer-songwriter from England." The student also confirmed she wanted to apply again in upcoming contests organized in Tokyo and Matsuyama (McMurray, 2021).

## **2. Methodology**

An online haiku contest was organized from August 1 to October 31, 2021, which called for participants to reflect on the themes of mystery or depth and then compose an original haiku about what came to mind. One haiku per entrant could be composed in Japanese or in English for the contest. A further demarcation of entries divided the groups into student or adults.

### **2.1 Participants**

At The International University of Kagoshima, there are courses entitled "Japanology" and "English Oral Communication II" that enable students to learn about Japanese culture and history in the English language. Approximately 210 students from all faculties of the university participated in the haiku lectures given in Japanology classes and 40 students participated in the haiku lectures given in English Oral Communication II classes. The English Oral Communication II class was held fifteen times and the Japanology class was held three times for the reading, appreciating, and possibly making of international haiku. Several of the students at

The International University of Kagoshima volunteered to participate in the online haiku contest organized at Akita University.

Five winning haiku and haiku judged worthy of honorary mention were selected for study in this paper because it was possible to interview the students a priori and after the contest results were announced.

## 2.2 Judges

The contest judges were Kazuhiro Kudo, Kyoko Uchimura, David McMurray, Ben Grafstrom, and Hidenori Hiruta. The judges were asked to give preference to 17 syllable haiku in English and Japanese. The results were publicly announced on the Akita International Haiku Network website (<https://akitahaiku.com/>), and the winners from each category were informed that they would be published in *Serow, Volume 5*. The contest was sponsored by the Akita International Haiku Network. It was supported by the following organizations: Akita University, Akita International University, Akita Prefecture, Akita City, Akita Newspaper, the Haiku International Exchange Association, and the Haiku UNESCO Registration Promotion Council.

## 3. Results

A total of 516 haiku from 50 countries were submitted for judging in the 10th Akita International Haiku Contest. Haiku were sent in by elementary and junior high school students, high school students, university students, and the general public on five continents.

The final results of the contest were announced on December 20, 2021. A second-year student from the International University of Kagoshima, Mei Okumura, was selected as a co-winner in the Japanese language category. She wrote these 17-syllables in Japanese, *Tsumetai kaze issho ni kaoru kinmokusei*, that can be translated into 5-7-5 syllables of English on 3-lines as:

Scent of the cold wind--  
blows stronger together with  
*osmanthus fragrans*

The contest's English open category received 319 entries, and the student category received 116 entries from the following 11 countries: Ghana, India, Japan, Nepal, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russia, and USA. A total of four haiku were selected from The International University of Kagoshima. Those participants could be contacted for interviews to confirm their understanding of the haiku.

Second-year student Ryuto Sakamoto at The International University of Kagoshima wrote:

Grandmother face  
wrinkles around the eyes  
proof of many smile

Despite the grammatical errors (a need for the possessive form "grandmother's" on the first line, and the

plural form of “smiles” on the third line) the above 15-syllable haiku was deemed acceptable by the judges because of its empathy. The words effectively transmitted the meaning that the student loves his aging grandmother. The junior is aiming to become an English teacher so she relished the opportunity to demonstrate her English skills on a topic that is introduced in textbooks at the Junior High School level.

First-year student Haruka Shiba at The International University of Kagoshima wrote:

even though it's autumn  
there are fireflies flying  
in my house at night

Firefly is a season word for May. This autumn season haiku reveals the effects of global warming. The student admitted, “I made an English haiku for the first time, and I am very honored to have been selected for the award. I will continue to do my best to improve my English skills.” She added that she was motivated to write more English haiku in the future. The haiku is a 6-7-5 syllable form. The student likely tried to reduce the number of syllables on the first line by using the contraction of “it is.” Replacing the noun autumn for fall would have perfected the 17 syllable format preferred by the contest organizers.

First-year student Naho Chayamichi at The International University of Kagoshima wrote:

Blue sky disappeared.  
Scent of a golden rhinoceros  
Coming of autumn

This haiku was penned by a first-year student who aspires to be an English teacher. She said, “I am very honored to receive the award for my unfamiliar English haiku. I expressed the beginning of autumn from the scent of *Osmanthus fragrans*.” I was fortunate to discover this beetle hiding under the autumn leaves near a blossoming golden orange-colored sweet olive tree. She loves nature and is very motivated to learn. She learned how to write English haiku in the “English Oral Communication II” course offered at her university (see Fig. 1). This haiku has a 5-9-5 syllable format. Shortening the noun on the second line to the informal “rhino” could have made it rank higher in the evaluation process.

Aoi Ikeda from the remote island of Amami Oshima, a United Nations World Heritage Site, wrote this refreshing haiku:

Autumn breeze and  
Under the persimmon tree  
cool of the evening

The wonderful haiku above is as fresh as the autumn sea breeze. She learned how to write English haiku in a “Japanology” course offered at her university. The haiku has 17 syllables spread on 3 lines in a 4-7-6 pattern.

#### **4. Discussion**

The haiku in this study were composed by students who were asked to reflect on the theme of mystery or depth. The contest organizers informed the applicants that the judges had been tasked to give preference to 17 syllable haiku in English and Japanese. The students elected to express ideas on global warming and its effect on flora and fauna on the islands where they live. The students chose to introduce exotic insects such as fireflies and beetles to their readers. It was a good opportunity for students in Kagoshima Prefecture that includes sub-tropical islands and rare fauna and flora to be able to connect with a community of people who are interested in haiku in the colder climates of Akita Prefecture and its serow goats. The contest networked international haikuists in the West and in Japan.

In this paper, it had been assumed that culture at high levels of aggregation (e.g., countries or “east vs. west”), shapes values for individuals. Different values, religions, languages, natural climates, social and economic conditions are inherent cultural factors within cultures that rise in mind when haiku are crafted. Haiku can describe how different cultures perceive different aspects of society. Japanese haikuists tend to adhere to writing through the 5-7-5 syllable form and apply seasonal words and poetics such as the pivot or *kireji*, whereas western poets tend to write freestyle haiku. The students therefore tried to follow the contest guidelines which may have encouraged more traditional haiku in this year’s contest when compared to previous years when young writers flashed pithier, cutting-edge new approaches in their creative writing.

##### **4.1 Pedagogical Implications**

In terms of education, “teachers’ beliefs in their efficacy affects their general orientation toward the educational process as well as their specific instructional activities” (Bandura, 1997, p. 241). In this research study, the teacher was seasoned in the writing and teaching of haiku in English.

Most of the students, however, were new to English haiku. And many students hesitated to compose a haiku. All students were reticent to share their work in the classroom when they were asked to stand up and read them, or to come to the front of the classroom and write them on the whiteboard. Most of the students, however, wrote their haiku in a daily journal that would be read by the teacher or a teaching assistant. After some encouragement finally the students agreed, when asked to volunteer, to apply for a haiku contest in Akita. The students were told that a committee of teachers would evaluate their haiku. The students did not believe they could win, but they believed they could at least complete an entry form. Interest in creative writing surged when a few students were selected. This class provided students with the opportunity to apply for an English haiku contest as part of the lesson to deepen their understanding of the literary form of English haiku. In addition, the students learned about creative writing and motivated their peers to further challenge composing scenes they saw or imagined in their heads by composing a few lines of English haiku.

##### **4.2 Cultural Differences**

Culture shapes individuals, but the measurement of cultural differences is challenging (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012). Traditional measures of cultural values focus on individual perceptions. Values are established and maintained within social communities of the family and its social environment. Within such communities,

values serve to maintain collective harmony whilst preserving individual agency. Cultural differences are undeniable: people from different cultural backgrounds act differently in a wide range of situations. But it is difficult to pinpoint the source of these cultural differences and to measure their underlying causes in cognition and behavior.

## 5. Conclusion

The contest judges spent time carefully reading and thinking about each entry. All the above haiku by university students as well as haiku by other winning poets will be published in the haiku journal “Serow, Volume 5” published in March 2022 (Fig. 2).

Participation in this contest seemed to be a motivating factor in changing student self-efficacy. The contest is open to all writers, both novice and veterans. It is held annually with the aim of sharing excellent creative writing, deepening mutual understanding among people of different cultures, and helping to realize world peace.

### 5.1 Further Study

Further study on how haiku judges select, and rank haiku within a meeting, a contest, or a community could confirm the importance of nationality vis-a-vis community collectivism. Community collectivism is shaped by prevalent values and practices within a community of haikuists, perhaps with a dichotomy such as Japanese haikuists and non-Japanese haikuists. This community environment (which embellishes a social category such as nationality) could be a source of cultural differences. This social dynamic analysis also helps to identify the content of the values most likely to be shaped within the haiku community: the focus could be on values essential for regulating members’ community behavior. Abiding by these values would be a prerequisite not just for the community to live harmoniously, but also for the individuals to fit in and be accepted.

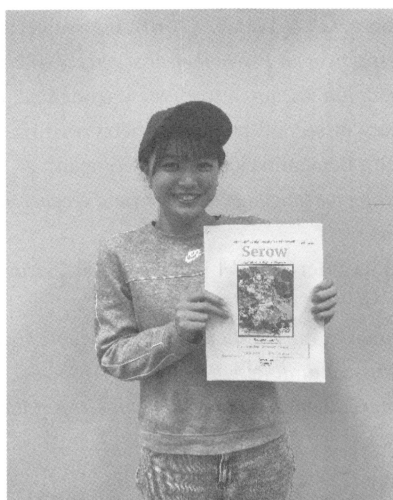


Figure 1

*Naho Chayamichi won an honorable mention in the contest*

Journal of the Akita International Haiku Network

# Serow

Selected Haiku in English • Japanese • Russian



Featuring poetry by

Barnabas Adeleke Margarita Bendrysheva Takahiko Kishino  
Priscilla Lignori Victoriia Nepanova Mio Okata Leonid Startsev  
Luisa-Evelina Stifi Jin Wada

Kamoshika  
Volume 1  
Spring 2018

Figure 2

Winning haiku will be published in the haiku journal Serow Volume 5

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