

# The *Haiku* as language game, syllogism and montage

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I utilize a series of creatively cognitive based activities, developed respectively out of Wittgenstein's perspective of language as a game; Eisenstein's (1949) use of montage in film theory; and a creative syllogistic procedure suggested by Barthes (1982). The rationale behind the implementation of these activities is to promote basic reading comprehension, poetry appreciation, and creative writing through guiding Taiwanese university students to write haikus in English. A haiku poem, in its original Japanese form, contains three lines broken down into a 5-7-5 syllabic pattern. The teaching technique uses multimedia by means of animated clip art, images downloaded from the Internet, and a scanning of student's work for analysis. Included in this paper are a discussion of what occurred in implementing this technique, samples of haiku poetry from traditional masters and of students, and an analysis of the language use of some randomly selected student's haikus. Observation and analysis indicate that students increased awareness of the syllabic nature of words in English and practiced creative writing of haiku poetry. They enhanced cognizance of their grammar problems and associated newly acquired vocabulary and language structure from visual images projected with the aid of multimedia. Suggestions are made for further research and multimedia-based activities using haikus.

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**KEYWORDS:** *multimedia, creative cognition, rhetoric, philosophy of language, poetry*

## Introduction

In this article, I describe and reflect on an experiential technique undertaken in a first- year university literature class for English majors in Taiwan. The rationale behind this technique is to promote basic reading comprehension, poetry appreciation and creative writing through guiding students to write haikus. To implement the technique requires a multimodal approach armed with the support of multimedia technology; a philosophical perspective; semiotic, hermeneutic, and rhetorical considerations; and the form of the traditional haiku. The Japanese poetic form of *haiku* was also once called *hokku* and evolved out of *renga*, an important form of Japanese poetry that flowered in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Ueda, 1992, p. 1). A haiku poem, in its original Japanese form, contains a three-line form broken down into a 5-7-5 syllabic pattern. As Ueda (1992) describes it, "this seventeen-syllable verse form demands the active participation of those who read it. The poet leaves the poem unfinished ... and

each reader is expected to ‘complete’ it with a personal interpretation” (p. 1). For example, consider the possibility of evoking differing images from the verse below written by Issa (1999/circa 1800).

The distant mountains  
 In your eyes  
 Mr. Dragonfly

The most famous haiku master, Bashō, is famous for the ambiguity of his verse, leaving wide spaces for readers’ imaginative interpretations to fill in gaps with their personally constructed meanings. Haiku poems, when translated into English, do not necessarily have to have the metrical constraints as imposed on them in their original Japanese. In fact, the rendering of Issa’s poem above does not capture the 5-7-5 form. However, in writing a haiku in English, writers can be taught to discipline themselves to follow this pattern. The brevity of this verse form allows learners of English as a foreign language who may still be in a variety of inter-language stages to complete a mini writing project in a creative fashion, to capture some of the nuances of the syllabic structure of English and to attempt to practice conciseness in writing in the target language while feeling a sense of accomplishment. At the same time, it will allow them greater appreciation of the polysemous nature of words and the true difficulty of being concise when using natural language. Asking students to read and write haikus in class or for assignments also provides them with an alternative to the analytical/expository writing usually found in literature courses (Teich, 2002). The use of the haiku can activate students’ creative cognitions by connecting language learning with *life* through a creative visualization process.

### **Creative cognition when writing haikus**

A possible benefit of writing haikus is that they promote creative cognition. Finke, Ward and Smith (1992), in a series of experiments in which their subjects had to create inventions with objects, found “that the relative number of creative inventions increased significantly as the task became more highly constrained” (p. 69). In the same way, a student is highly restricted by the 5-7-5 syllable pattern when creating a haiku. Each line must contain an object, image or description of an action depicted in words. It can be asserted that writing haikus as a form of writing practice, with its restraining elements, then should serve as a way to hone a writer’s ability to carefully choose words in a precise way. At the same time it can be used to develop creative use of words and most importantly, aid in generating an interest in learning how to use and expand vocabulary. In short, the writing of such verses can allow writers to succinctly and concisely apply or test the usage of newly acquired vocabulary in a creative work.

### **Language games and the haiku**

A related teaching approach to develop creative cognition that shares some of the elements necessary for haiku creation are found in the synectics approach.

Training sessions to develop innovation through synectics (Gordon, 1961) in business, science and the arts involve the promotion of *play* with words, analogies and metaphors in which the participants are asked to make the familiar strange. A similar process takes place in writing haikus. In training sessions using synectics, Gordon (1961) notes students are initially self-conscious in implementing the strategies that open up creativity; however, eventually they gain spontaneity, and even at the beginning stages the strategies work (p. 32). Hence, under observation in this study is the extent that students can successfully engage in creative writing at the same time as they practice usage of the target language.

We can also view haiku writing from a philosophical perspective. As Wittgenstein (1958) observes, "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (Section 19, p. 8e). According to Janik and Toulmin (1973) Wittgenstein realized, early in his philosophical writings as in the *Tractatus*, that "poetry is the sphere in which the *sense* of life is expressed" (p. 195). Wittgenstein notes (1958, Section 23, p. 11e) that there are a multiplicity of languages and he equates languages with language games. Some languages may grow or become archaic and forgotten while others are newly created. To create a haiku is to engage in an old language game. From a long list of language games which Wittgenstein (1958, Section 23, pp.11e-12e) expounds on, several are especially pertinent for the creation of a haiku: *describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements, constructing an object from a description (a drawing) and reporting an event*. Ancient language games like haiku creations can take on novel variations as such language games reconstruct themselves in light of changing social and technological circumstances.

### The haiku as a creative syllogism

Barthes (1982) describes poetry from a semiotic perspective as containing signifiers for that which is inexpressible and multi-sensory which make up a class of impressions which are in fact unclassifiable; he further describes poetry as involving "concentrated emotion," and of "sincere notation of a privileged moment" (p. 71). To illustrate this in relation to the haiku poem he quotes a work from Joko:

How many people  
Have crossed the Seta bridge  
Through the autumn rain!

Here Barthes (1982) offers up an impression or an interpretation when he notes that in this poem, "We perceive the image of fleeting time" (p. 71). He further proposes that each symbolically "charged" feature of the haiku's "tercet (its three verses of five seven, and five syllables)" can only be interpreted by Westerners "as a syllogistic design in three tenses (rise, suspense, conclusion)" (Ibid.). To illustrate the above he uses this haiku:

The old pond;  
A frog jumps in;  
Oh! The sound of the water.

**Table 1**

An elaborated model of the creative syllogism of haiku

Premises and conclusion	Forms of life	Haiku lines
1. Rise (minor)	Birth and growth	First (5 syllables)
2. Suspension (major)	An event in life	Second (7 syllables)
3. Conclusion	End of event	Third (5 syllables)

Barthes (1982) then tells us "In this singular syllogism, inclusion is achieved by force: in order to be contained in it, the minor premise must leap into the major" (pp. 71-72). He goes on to say, "Of course, if we renounce metaphor or syllogism, commentary would become impossible: to speak of the haiku would be purely and simply to repeat it" (p. 72). This idea of a creative syllogism can be connected to Wittgenstein's concept of poetry as a language game in which the sphere of life is expressed as illustrated by Table 1.

In the model above, the haiku can be seen as reflecting a moment in life in miniature. Life begins with birth and growth, and these two are followed by a series of events that continue until the end of the cycle of life. However, in the haiku, the lines are focused on a singular event within a life. Life is made up of the ephemeral moments of birth, growth and movement toward some central events. The reader can imagine events leading up to a haiku and after a haiku such as in the one above where one is in the country side, and walks up to an old pond. One sees, then hears, the frog jump in and then goes on to see other frogs and insects cavorting around the pond. However, the haiku itself focuses on a single event in life's panoply of occurrences.

### *Traditional syllogisms in contrast to the creative syllogism*

In order to see this creative syllogism in a broader perspective, we can compare it to the traditional syllogism. According to Corbett and Connors (1999), the traditional syllogism is based on the principle that "if a is true, then b is true, then c must be true" (p. 38). Corbett and Connors go on and tell us that the syllogism is constructed by three categorical propositions; the first two are the *premises*, the last is the *conclusion* drawn from these premises. Moreover, the categorical syllogism is also built on three terms: a major term, a minor term, and a middle term" (p. 42). We can illustrate these items with the following syllogism in Table 2.

Corbett and Connors (1999) further explain that the *major term* is the

**Table 2**

The traditional syllogism

<b>Major premise:</b>	All women are mortal beings.
<b>Minor premise:</b>	Angelina Jolie is a woman.
<b>Conclusion:</b>	Therefore, Angelina Jolie is a mortal being.

predicative term of the conclusion (as in *mortal beings* above). The *minor term* is the subject term of the conclusion (as in *Angelina Jolie*). The *middle term* is the term that appears in both of the premises but does not appear in the conclusion (*women* and its singular form *woman*) (p. 42). Similar syllogisms can be seen in elementary books on logic. Besides the categorical syllogism there is the rhetorical syllogism. Aristotle, in his book on rhetoric, developed a syllogism called an *enthymeme* which was based on probable premises rather than on certain ones (Crowley, 1990, pp. 115-116). Smith (1999) tells us that “an *enthymeme* is a syllogism based on *probable* premises which are acceptable to the audience” (p. 89). Because of this factor of probability, rather than certainty, enthymemes are the favored syllogism for rhetorical argument. Smith (1999) further describes the rhetorical syllogism as a syllogism based on probability wherein the audience usually supplies a premise. Unlike the inductive example, the *enthymeme* attempts to apply a general rule to a specific case. According to Aristotle, enthymemes are governed by four general lines of argument which are common to all speeches: (1) what is possible and impossible, (2) what is past fact, (3) what is future fact and (4) what is the size, greater or smaller. Each of these questions can be used to generate an argument (p. 91).

A third kind of syllogism could be a creative one as reflected in the haiku. This kind awaits further development, but we can see one example in Barthes' description of the haiku. From the perspective of creative cognition and synectics, the classical syllogism cannot achieve the desired goal of opening up our cognitive creative capacities. According to Gordon (1961), “The creative mind in process realizes a higher order of relevance which lends meaning to what we would normally or logically regard as a collection of irrelevant details. Formal processes of logical thought can't achieve this end” (p. 127). Gordon goes on to observe that what this means is that, “A syllogism is the classic form of this closed circle of relevance; to be caught in a syllogism is like being trapped in a doorless closet. The syllogism is closed and cold, but it is internally relevant” (p. 127). We could also argue that the creation of a haiku and other forms of creative cognition are *paralogical*, that is, they go *beyond logic* in their means of generation as they cannot be coded as a definite process (Kent, 1993). Each haiku is a unique move in a kind of language game, as Wittgenstein (1958) sensed language itself is. Perelman (1982), a proponent of New Rhetoric, leaves the old syllogistic paradigms behind as he argues that both poetry and philosophy require natural languages, ambiguity, and the possibility of multiple interpretations are the rule. These are the rule rather than the exception in poetry and philosophy.

Specifically, the language of philosophers requires metaphors which are characterized by their lack of clarity. Perelman (1982) notes logical forms of cognition are disconnected from nature which is ambiguous and paradoxical. Humans are, in their innate temperaments, complex concoctions of the divine and the bestial, and these characteristics contradict logical explanations (p. 43). Scientific minds may try to rid phenomena of ambiguity through logical constructions and in so doing limit themselves and the phenomena under their scrutiny and make constructions that are in their logic disconnected

from nature and unable to capture it in actuality. Thus, poetry and philosophy remain powerful attempts to capture nature as it is. This is not to discount the importance of logic or rationality for human development but to be aware that they too can be reconstructed in light of new information and perspectives.

### The haiku as a montage

Another basis for haiku based activities lies in Eisenstein's (1949) conception of montage. Montage in a film is created by arranging sequences of images by the filmmaker to create a particular artistic effect. A haiku line is similar to image switching in montage. Each line is like a camera shot or phrase. Students can visualize the haiku and are provided visual cues to write their own haikus. Images can be provided based on haikus written by old masters. At the end of an activity they can compare their haikus with the original. A teacher can also seek out film clips that have striking images and music. For example, in my class I have used the film *Koyannitsu*. Danesi (2002) describes this film as one with "no characters, plot, dialogue, or commentary—in a word, nothing recognizable as a narrative" (p. 126). Instead, the film can be considered a kind of "musical sonata" with the music of Philip Glass aligned with the scenes (Danesi, 2002, p. 127). Monaco (1981, p. 39) observes that music often determines image in films and gives Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* as an example. The activities that are described below grew out of an attempt to apply montage, creative syllogism, and language play to the practice of writing haikus.

### The procedure

#### *Time, setting, and participants*

These activities took place during a Monday afternoon class for two fifty-minute periods in a Freshmen Literature class with 55 participants at a university in Taiwan in the spring semester of 2008. A follow-up activity took place the following week for a single period. To begin with, I told the students that we would attempt to do some creative activities related to a poetic form called *haiku*. I collected their work at the end of the class, and it counted as part of the class participation grade.

#### *Activity One: Haiku visualization*

This activity was influenced by Eisenstein's (1949) proposal that the Japanese haiku is like image switching or montage in film making. The rationale was to have students first visualize the objects depicted in each line as if they were a short series of photographic images like a montage which they could then depict as one picture in a drawing. First, I introduced them to a haiku by Bashō:

moonflowers so white  
at night, alongside the outhouse  
in the light of a torch

**Figure 1**

Activity One: Draw the images

**Three visual elements for each line of the haiku***Sources of the images*

(left to right): Moonflowers. (2009). *Natureperspective.com*; Shutterstock's Outhouse. (2009). *Faqs.org*; Grondona's Torch at night. (2006). *Sxc.hu*.

I displayed this work on a PowerPoint display and explained the 5-7-5 syllabic framework. After introducing the haiku and information in regard to when and where Bashō lived and wrote, I provided a set of images, showing three photographs of three objects: moonflowers, an outhouse, and a torch similar to those as seen in Figure 1. Students then were asked to depict the *action* of the haiku in a drawing on sheets of B4 paper that were distributed to them. I went around the classroom and monitored the activity to ensure that everyone understood and that all the students were drawing a picture to show the scene as it had been written in the poem. This activity took almost a whole period of class time and most of them became very absorbed in drawing the images of the haiku using the words above and the images.

*Activity Two: A creative syllogism*

In the second period, I introduced Barthes' (1982) concept of the haiku to the participants as a syllogistic design in three steps: *rise, suspense, conclusion*. To illustrate this on the PowerPoint, I showed Barthes' (1982, p. 71) example of this creative syllogism as juxtaposed with the famous poem by Bashō about an old frog jumping into the pond (as described in the previous section on the nature of syllogisms). I followed this with another example of a haiku from Kyoroku (n.d., as cited in Eisenstein, 1949, p. 130) to further illustrate the syllabic structure and imagery evoked by the poem (see Figure 2). Eisenstein (1949, p. 130) thought the lines of this particular haiku poem bore a striking resemblance to montage in film and image switching (transition in montage).

I followed this with an *animated* montage haiku of a selection of images created by *animated* clip art found on the Internet similar to those shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 2**

How a haiku can be visualized as a montage

**Kyoroku's haiku visualized**

*It is early dawn.  
The castle is surrounded.  
By the cries of wild ducks.*



Source of the image

Castle and ducks. (n.d.). Microsoft.com

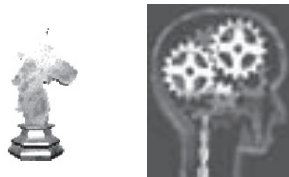
**Figure 3**

Four steps in creating a haiku from an animated clip art montage

**First line of 5 syllables:** Rise



**Second line of 7 syllables:** Suspense



**Third line of 5 syllables:** Conclusion



**Check your three images**









Sources of the images

(left to right; top to bottom): Rotating globe. (2009). Wikimedia.com; Animated chess piece. (n.d.). Bestanimations.com; Animated gifgears. (n.d.). Gifandgif.eu; Animated bugs. (n.d.). Heatheranimations.com.



**Figure 4**

Four steps in creating a haiku from a still montage

<p><b>First line of the haiku:</b> Rise</p> 	<p><b>Second line of the haiku:</b> Suspense</p> 
<p><b>Third line of the haiku:</b> Conclusion</p> 	<p><b>Check your three lines</b></p> <p>Rise </p> <p>Suspense </p> <p>Conclusion </p>

*Sources of the images*

(left to right; top to bottom): Mao's Chinese New Year in Chinatown? Bring earplugs. (2007). Gothamist.com; Boy. (n.d.). Microsoft.com; Pregnant. (n.d.).Microsoft.com; Nurse. (n.d.). Microsoft.com.

In the procedure as displayed in Figure 3, students saw each image separately and had a few minutes to write a line for each one. Then they viewed all three images and completed writing their haikus. When they had finished, for the purpose of comparison, I showed them the somewhat sinister haiku that I had written for these images:

Spin on, world's axis.  
A chess piece tangled in gears.  
Spin a trap, spider!

*Activity three: Composing a haiku from a still montage*

I found after doing the activity above that I still had time so I followed up on this activity by projecting a still montage as shown in Figure 4 above. As students were writing their haikus I went around and encouraged them to follow the 5-7-5 pattern as much as possible. This activity is also described in Myers (2007).

*Samples of students' work*

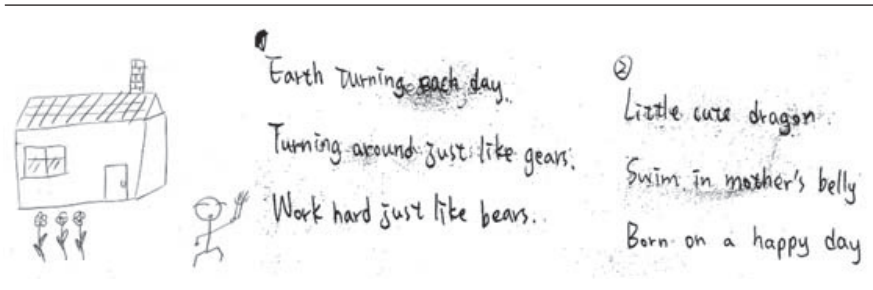
The following week, after having their work scanned, we reviewed their work on a PowerPoint display for about half an hour and I showed them examples of noteworthy haikus that they had created and also focused on some common

grammatical errors which had been committed by many of them, the most glaring of which was the omission of the third person singular s. In Figures 5, 6, and 7 are some samples of what I consider the better written haikus combined with the drawings they made of an outhouse, torch, and moonflowers. I based the criteria for a well-written haiku on the absence of glaring grammatical problems, the ability to follow the syllabic constraints and the originality of the content.

In Figure 5, the student was able to complete all of the activities with minimum grammatical problems. The significance of the student's haiku is open

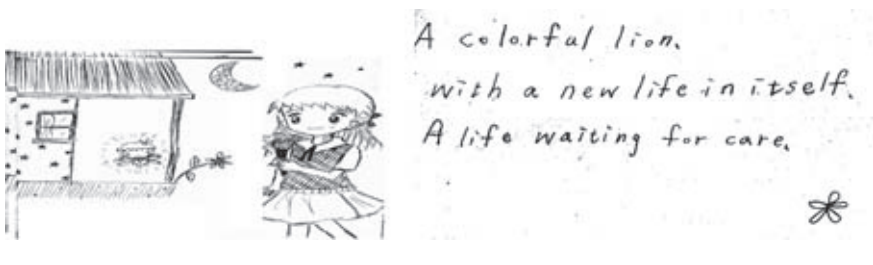
**Figure 5**

Noteworthy sample 1



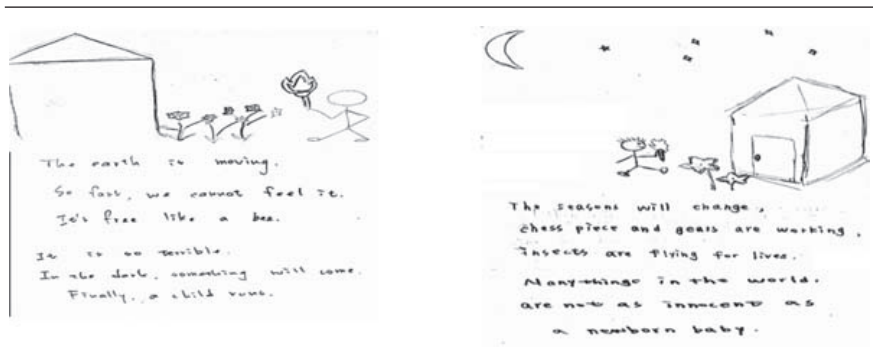
**Figure 6**

Noteworthy sample 2



**Figure 7**

Noteworthy sample 3



to interpretation. The student made a good effort to adhere to the syllabic structure of the traditional haiku with the exception of the second line of the second haiku where the student may have thought the "s" in mother's was a syllable. In contrast, in Figure 6, we can see that the student was not able to complete all of the samples, perhaps because she became absorbed in the drawing; it appears that she did not attempt to do the second assignment but continued to work on her drawing. By the time the second activity had passed and the third activity began, with the still images beginning with a dragon (which she thought was a lion), she had completed her sketching and was ready to actually write a haiku.

In Figure 7, two more students managed to complete all three activities without too many grammatical problems.

### *A sample of students' grammar errors*

Although in this paper I do not provide a systematic break down of the grammatical problems of all my students but only an indication that is more of a general impression, the haikus above were chosen mainly because the students were able to maintain what seemed to me grammatical control of their written language. However, most students were unable to do this. We might infer from this that the ability to compose grammatically error-free haikus correlates positively with levels of general proficiency in English. More typical of students' creations were these randomly selected samples of errors as indicated in Figure 8. In sample 1, the student wrote:

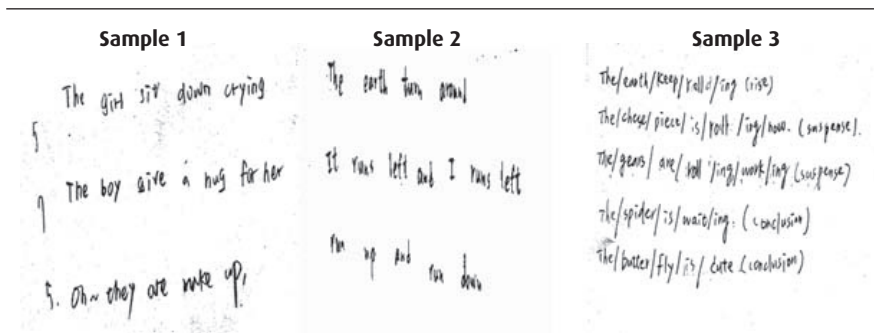
The girl sit down crying  
The boy give a hug for her  
Oh—they are wake up

The writer of the haiku was able to achieve the 5-7-5 syllabic form but had some grammatical problems with the third person singular *s*, preposition use, and appropriate tense usage. In sample 2, another student composed the following verse:

The earth turn around  
It runs left and I runs left  
run up and run down

### **Figure 8**

Three random samples of grammar or other errors



This student was also able to achieve the syllabic constraints but had problems with the *s* usage in pronoun/noun agreement. The student was unsure how to use it. Moreover, in sample 3, the student was not sure about the meaning of *rise*, *suspense*, and *conclusion*, how to perform appropriate syllabic division, or that a haiku is a three-line poem and wrote 5 lines instead in the form below:

The/earth/keep/roll/ing (rise)  
 The/ chese/ piece/ is/ roll/ing now (suspense)  
 The/gears/are/rolling/working (suspense)  
 The/spider/is/wait/ing (conclusion)  
 The/ butterfly/is/cute (conclusion)

## Discussion

In these random selections, we can see that there are unique variations in these students' cognitive make-up both in terms of creativity and the stages of their language learning. The patterns emerging from my classroom observations and perusal of their haikus tell us something about the language problems that a given group of first-year Taiwanese students face in learning English. Their exposure to English in high school and junior high school has not prepared them to *actually write* grammatically correct sentences although they have explicitly studied the rules of grammar, as knowledge of English syntax is necessary to pass the English examinations for entry to university. Such gaps between actual language performance and knowledge of rules may occur in many EFL (English as a foreign language) environments around the world.

## Further suggested activities and research

A number of other haiku worlds await discovery and application in the classroom. For example, the haiku could be viewed as a micro-narrative. Barthes (1982) writes that the haiku is "a brief event which immediately finds its proper form" (p. 75). This poetic form has as its focus apprehensible facts discovered in our surroundings. Students could be directed to write haikus as a brief narrative concerning a single event that had occurred in their lives. An additional activity might be to have students seek out their own haiku images from clip art from the Internet, download them, and then write a three-line poem from the images. A third possibility is to have students work in small cooperative groups rather than individually and engage in a haiku contest. Such an activity would be in keeping with the haiku tradition derived from *renga*, which literally means "linked poetry". Haikus were traditionally "usually written by a team of poets under a set of prescribed rules" (Ueda, 1992, p.1). A fourth activity could be to extend the writing assignments so that the students imagine the immediate events leading up to an event in a particular haiku and shortly after the event and compose a paragraph describing these additional events. In regard to empirical research, the degree to which the level of language proficiency among students is a determining factor in creating successful haikus could be explored. Also, to what degree haiku instruction is useful for those students whose English ability is

not yet highly proficient could be studied. Furthermore, criteria for evaluating the usefulness of composition of haikus in EFL learning could be devised and tested. These options and many others await the creative teacher who has an interest in initiating reluctant Taiwanese or other EFL students, who for the most part seem baffled by the meaning of Western poetry, into the first stages of understanding that poetry allows for multiple perspectives and ambiguity much as nature does herself, even as it is formed with game-like parameters, as Wittgenstein (1958) asserts.

## Conclusion

The pedagogical possibilities inherent in haikus are limitless. In this paper, I have explored how to employ haikus through classroom observation and by examining the creative productions of 55 students. All these first-year Taiwanese university students practiced their English writing, reading, and creative language generation through a playful approach with words and syllables. There was a wide variation in students' haikus as each student produced unique ones. Many students had problems with control of grammatical usage; others were unable to apply the syllogistic framework of *rise*, *suspension*, and *conclusion* as it was not clear to them. This suggests that more class time might have to be spent on providing more models of this syllogism by showing how it works in a variety of haikus. It also may mean that this creative syllogistic technique does not work that well.

On the other hand, students clearly benefited from this exercise by increasing their awareness of the syllabic structure of words in English. Surprisingly, I observed that some students did not seem to have had much exposure to breaking English words down into syllables. Students were also able to associate vocabulary and language structure with visual images and experienced a visualization process through drawing and the use of multimedia. In the follow-up session, it was possible, by scanning their drawings and haikus to illustrate to them some of their grammatical gaps and the non-standard use of English in their writing. I conducted this activity over three class periods, as I felt that it had to be done slowly, and that it would take up quite a substantial amount of class time, if the students were really going to enjoy it. The activity also calls for the teacher to be proactive and provide individual assistance to students. This will keep a teacher very busy if she or he has a large class.

## CORRESPONDENCE

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