



Exploring earthquake experiences: A study of second language learners' ability to express and communicate deeply traumatic events in poetic form



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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current study was to investigate the content of poetical descriptions in relation to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and to develop our views of what second language (L2) writers see and feel through such traumatic life experiences. This study employs Hanauer's (2010) methodological guidelines for the use of poetry as a research method, but focuses on L2 writers' traumatic life experiences. The methodology chosen was mixed-method research which involved statistical analysis of the corpus of 773 earthquake poems written by 78 Japanese L2 learners and an in-depth analysis of thematic issues across the poems. This study shows that the poetry written by these Japanese L2 learners was characterized as short, personal, direct and descriptive texts, including some unique styles due to transfer of first language (L1) linguistic and rhetorical knowledge. The poetry presented here describes eleven thematic issues Japanese L2 writers experienced in this traumatic event and represents their direct responses and emotional concerns from their earthquake experiences. This study illustrates the ability of L2 writers to express and understand quite extreme personal events through expressive writing.

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1. Introduction

Traditional second language (L2) pedagogy has focused primarily on the acquisition of linguistic and grammatical knowledge of the target language. In the language classroom, teachers are inclined to use a form-based approach through which students study the form of language systematically (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This learning approach can enable L2 learners to develop linguistic knowledge, but it prevents them from understanding how language is practically used. As a result, students develop L2 structural and grammatical knowledge, but they have no idea of how to use it in order to construct meaning and communicate it with others in real-world situations (Iida, 2010). A critical issue in this context is that traditional L2 pedagogy has lost of sight of "the flesh-and blood individuals who are doing the learning" (Kramsch, 2006, p. 98). In other words, language teaching often seems to maintain a separation between learners' minds, affect, bodies, and social behaviors. As Hanauer (2012a) stated, however, learning a new language is "a significant, potentially life-changing, event" (p. 105) and L2 literacy learning should put human individuals, their personal experiences, and social contextualization at the heart of the learning process. Consequently, L2 writers need to understand the connections between thought, words and life in the learning experience (Bishop, 1999).

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Reflecting on this perspective, some applied linguists discuss the teaching of poetry writing in the L2 composition classroom (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Hanauer, 2012a, 2014; Iida, 2012). Poetry writing is a literacy practice “aimed at facilitating an authentic and meaningful writing experience for L2 writers” and can be “a medium for personal exploration and expression” (Hanauer, 2014, p. 22). It has the potential to allow for the expression of thoughts, emotions and personal life experiences. Theoretically speaking, writing poetry as a form of meaningful literacy learning can allow L2 writers to explore and understand both the internal and external world of the individual (Hanauer, 2012a). However, poetry writing is still an uncommon task for L2 learners (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Iida, *in press*) and it remains relatively unexplored the degree to which L2 writers have the ability to write poetry in the target language and how they understand and express their deeply traumatic life experiences in poetic forms.

The aim of this article is to discuss the ability of L2 writers to express and communicate traumatic events in poetic form. It focuses on Japanese L2 writers' experiences related to the magnitude 9.0 Great East Japan Earthquake (hereafter, the 3.11 Earthquake), which occurred in the Pacific Ocean off the coast of the Tohoku region in Japan at 2:46 pm on March 11, 2011. First, the article reviews the previous studies on expressive forms of writing as a way to explore personal life events. Secondly, it describes empirical research on Japanese L2 writers' expression of traumatic life experiences in poetic forms. The main objectives were to examine the linguistic features of poetry written by Japanese L2 writers and to explore their poetic descriptions in relation to the 3.11 Earthquake. Listening to their voices and identifying what they saw and felt in the disaster enables us to better understand this cultural trauma, which appears “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander, 2004, p. 1). By doing so, this article intends to contribute to the development of our knowledge of L2 poetry and L2 writers and to propose poetry writing as a form of meaningful literacy learning through which L2 learners can reflect on, explore, and express their own personal life experiences in the learning process.

2. Personal life stories, traumatic experiences and expressive writing

Poetry writing is used for different purposes in educational settings. From pedagogical and practical perspectives, poetry is used as a mode of learning (Bizzaro, 2009; Young, 2003), as a form of literacy practice to express emotions (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Hanauer, 2012a), as a means to develop L2 literacy (Iida, 2012), and as a way of healing or therapy (Bishop, 1997; Chavis, 2011). From a methodological viewpoint, poetry writing is also used as data to examine identity construction in poetic texts (Hanauer, 2010, 2012b; Park, 2013) and to explore the study abroad experience (Hanauer, 2010; Iida, *in press*). Regardless of its different usages, a theoretical underpinning of poetry writing in educational contexts is for students to express their emotions, passions, or voices and for researchers to analyze the relationship among texts, meaning and the writers.

Poetry writing allows L2 learners to pay more attention to meaning than forms of language. In contrast to traditional ESL and EFL literacy instruction, poetry writing provides L2 learners with opportunities to reflect on their personal life experiences and negotiate how to construct and express their voices in the target language. The deep bonds between this form of writing and the emotional dimension of human life are evident as a key aspect of definitions of poetry. Hanauer (2004) characterizes poetry as “a literary text that presents the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the writer through a self-referential use of language that creates for the reader and writer a new understanding of the experience, thought or feeling expressed in the text” (p. 10). Chavis (2011) also considers poetry as the embodiment of “the presence of an authentic voice speaking to us across time and space, often in throes of emotion and at an important juncture” (p. 25). In addition, Bolton (2011), in agreement with Furman's (2007) notion of poetry writing, regards it as “an attempt to explore, and create, meaning in existence; since existence is mostly ordinary, then poetry needs to illuminate the mundane: poetry captures the deep emotion of lived experience in a highly compressed form” (p. 101). Writing poems in this sense involves reflective and linguistic negotiation to construct meaning, and poetry is seen as a representation of the writer's voice (Iida, 2010) consisting of their cognitive and emotional concerns for real-life experiences.

Previous studies on earthquakes and literacy practice have reported on how victims understood their earthquake experiences and how the traumatic events were communicated in expressive forms of writing from anthropologists' viewpoints. For instance, Jung (2009) examined issues surrounding the 9.21 earthquake in Taiwan. In this study, she investigated various aspects of social life in the devastated area, from the moment of the quake to the reconstruction phase years later, in the devastated area through narratives written by the victims. Research findings showed that the participants' narratives pointed out the recognition of painful losses, deep resentment over the losses, ways to remove their grievances, and prayers in which such losses would never happen in the future. This study revealed narrative writing as a tool to better understand the catastrophic event: “telling personal stories not only conveys the message of the narrator's sufferings, but is how they answer the event and society” (p. 59).

Ulysse (2011) examined Haitian women's reflections on the earthquake which occurred on January 12, 2010. A qualitative analysis of personal essays, poems, photographs, and a piece of fiction written by Haitian women showed that their personal stories came from the themes of courage, solidarity, trauma, hope, despair, contempt and will. It also revealed that these personal stories were not the focus of popular media coverage, but captured Haitian women's voices and feelings for the catastrophic moment at the individual level.

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