

Using Renga for Reading Comprehension and Collaborative Writing

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Teaching Context

- Location: Greece
- Level: Upper Intermediate
- Learners: Second grade students aged 16 to 17 (General Lyceum of Plomari, Lesvos)
- Class size: 15 students
- Time: 80 minutes, two teaching sessions
- Technical equipment: One computer per 5 students
- Materials needed: Computers, flashcards
- Textbook: *General Lyceum English 2* by Institute of Educational Policy (IEP)

Problem

My students experience monotonous days with their seven-hour timetables. In their English class, they are expected to go through activities in the order they are presented in the textbook (*General Lyceum English 2*). For example, in Unit 4 “Learning to Fly”, about Richard Bach’s (1970) *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, the scope and sequence of storyline-related activities do not have particular resonance with my students. Students usually read and comment on extracts from the book before being guided to the main objective of the unit which is to learn how to create a storyline. Knowing my students’ short attention spans and predicting that poetry had an underexplored potential for engaging attention, I began to contemplate alternative prompts to derive alternative outcomes.

I saw the need to break our daily routine with an activity that cultivates a positive view of writing. In addition, I saw my students’ need to have more practice with computer technology. In general, they need more opportunities to see learning English not as drudgery but as a rewarding experience. Tailoring the lesson to the students’ need for change was the first step towards adopting long-term perspectives on lesson planning.

Solution

To address my students’ needs, I designed a collaborative poetry writing activity that expanded the textbook’s activities and brought some fun to the class. The Japanese renga poetry form proved an excellent choice for Unit 4, mentioned above because it provided a break from repetitive storytelling patterns. But first, I had to set the stage for effective collaboration.



Ypsilanti, A. (2023). Using renga for reading comprehension and collaborative writing. *TESOL Working Paper Series*, 21, 134-143.

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Pre-writing

Groups of five students are seated around computers with flashcards for their first contact with a collaborative activity (Task 1a). Students use their electronic worksheet to visit a webpage about a specific form of collaborative poetry through a text hyperlink. Here, they can watch and listen to groups of poets reciting their renga poems to get a sense of how collaborative poetry works (Task 1b). Then, my five examples of renga poems inspired by my earlier contributions to Oxford University's Life-Writing of Immeasurable Events project run by the Oxford Center for Life-writing (OCLW) give students the opportunity to discover the content of renga poetry (Task 1c). The guiding Short Answer Questions (SAQs), based on the same poems, facilitate the discovery of the form of renga poetry (Task 1d), while preparing students for the personalized composition in the writing stage. At the same time, students continue to familiarize themselves with computer technology, i.e., through the use of the online syllable counter (Slaouti & Bourboureka, 2005).

Writing

Following analysis of the form and content of renga poetry, students are asked to read an extract from *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (Task 2a) in order to produce a collaborative poem drawing on personal experience while conforming to given metrical rules (Task 2b). Experimentation with renga poetry composition is followed by the line editing stage, which is performed as a round robin activity, involving all students in the redrafting process (Tasks 2d, 2e). Word-processing features such as copy/paste and delete/copy facilitate the implementation of this activity.

Post-writing

One of the textbook's questions in Activity 14, "Does the real Jonathan Seagull really live within us all?", encourages personalizing students' own experiences for a class discussion based on "ideas from the book blurb" (IEP, 2017, p. 61). My unique use of some of the same ideas (i.e., the second text prompt of Task 3) aims at helping students gain a more authentic experience of writing personal poems addressed to a real-world audience. This time, they have to write renga poetry for submission to a young poets' competition (Tasks 3a, 3b). Although this is a homework activity, collaboration through Google docs transforms it into a poetry workshop (Task 3c). The collaboration factor, reinforced in the intervening proofreading and editing processes, acts as a catalyst in finalizing the draft version. The second one-hour teaching session (Task 3d) is dedicated to the whole classroom functioning as a group "providing oral feedback in the form of conferencing" (Calfoglou & Sifakis, 2004, p. 209). Electronic submission to the competition is carried out with the aid of the teacher (Task 3e).

Conclusion

Sometimes teachers must respond to students' expectations with a less mainstream method. Writing poetry can be a good alternative for developing writing skills because experience has shown that it works better for students who prefer style pursuance to content elaboration. The word processor functions are as much the learner's ally in giving form and meaning to their creativity, as they are the teacher's strategy in motivating students to explore their writing skills.

References

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Appendix



A. Pre-writing

1. You are going to work in groups of five. Take your seats for your groups in front of one of the computers and turn it on. On the desktop you will see a file named JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL. **Group 1** should rename the file by deleting the second and third word. **Group 2** should delete the first and third word. **Group 3** should delete the first and second word. These are the names of your groups.

eg. [JONATHAN.docx](#)

[LIVINGSTON.docx](#)

[SEAGULL.docx](#)

1a. Look at the paper-version flashcard of your group and read the corresponding extract from Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

LIVINGSTONE

What he had once hoped for the Flock, he now gained for himself alone; he learned to fly, and was not sorry for the price that he had paid. Jonathan Seagull discovered that boredom and fear and anger are the reasons that a gull's life is so short, and with these gone from his thought, he lived a long fine life indeed. (Bach, 1970, p. 36)

JONATHAN

How much more there is now to living!
Instead of our drab slogging forth and back to the fishing boats, there's a reason to life! We can lift ourselves out of ignorance, we can find ourselves as creatures of excellence and intelligence and skill. We can be free! We can learn to fly! (Bach, 1970, p. 27)

SEAGULL

He spoke of very simple things — that it is right for a gull to fly, that freedom is the very nature of his being, that whatever stands against that freedom must be set aside, be it ritual or superstition or limitation in any form. (Bach, 1970, p. 83)

- 1b.** There is a Japanese poetic form called renga, composed in groups, which opened the road to haiku poetry. Visit <https://www.thecabinidaho.org/read/susan-rowe-seven-poets-three-poems-one-virtual-reading> to read and listen to three renga poems, i.e., *A Renga about Shelter*, *A Renga about Courage*, *A Renga about Resilience* (The Cabin Center for Readers & Writers, 2023).

How many people write a renga?

- 1c.** Now read the following examples of renga poems (written by me) and let me know which one you liked best and why.

Does reading them make you feel you would like to know more about the story behind them?

Poem #1: [The silent ways of the linden tree \(by Angela Ypsilanti\)](#)

To my dearest bees
who add honey to my tea
from the linden tree.

Fly from flower to flower.
Please, defy all risks for me.

To my dearest tree,
born on the same day as me,
thank you for the tea.

Let the bees work free in groups.
Please, release them from your grip.

Poem #2: [A change in morning habits \(by Angela Ypsilanti\)](#)

Stacks of unread books
inviting me to reach out.
Do I dare break free?

Too late to drop the habit.
I will turn off the light now.

When the morning comes
I will reread my old books
that guarantee what

I cannot leave behind for
the sake of starting anew.

Poem #3: [Daily Struggle With Space and Time \(by Angela Ypsilanti\)](#)

Claiming back my space
for how long I should not know.
Back on my rower,

what is rightfully mine stays
always waiting in the row.

Poem #4: [Hazel in a nutshell](#) (by Angela Ypsilanti)

The mix of colors
depend on my mood palette.
How to make hazel

depends on everything else
that my eyes see in the world.

Poem #5: [Clicked-away identities](#) (by Angela Ypsilanti)

With my lucky wand
I metamorphose fortune
into the version

I find appealing to me
rewinding the clock at will

1d. Time for counting stanzas, lines and syllables in renga poems! If you need help with counting syllables, go to [Syllable Counter](#).

- a. How many lines are there in the first stanza?
- b. How many syllables are there in each line?
- c. How many lines are there in the second stanza?
- d. How many syllables are in each line?
- e. Do stanzas repeat? How?
- f. How many stanzas are there?

B. Writing

2. Open this worksheet electronically from your desktop. The file's name is Poetry writing worksheet.docx. Follow the steps below to prepare for collaboratively composing your own poem.
- 2a. Read the following extract from Richard Bach's *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, which is a dialogue between Jonathan Livingston Seagull and Sullivan Seagull. This is your text prompt.

"Sully, for shame!" Jonathan said in reproach, "and don't be foolish! What are we trying to practice every day? If our friendship depends on things like space and time, then when we finally overcome space and time, we've destroyed our own brotherhood! But overcome space, and all we have left is Here. Overcome time, and all we have left is Now. And in the middle of Here and Now, don't you think that we might see each other once or twice?"

Sullivan Seagull laughed in spite of himself. "You crazy bird," he said kindly. "If anybody can show someone on the ground how to see a thousand miles, it will be Jonathan Livingston Seagull.: He looked at the sand. "Goodbye, Jon, my friend."

"Good-bye, Sully. We'll meet again." And with that, Jonathan held in thought an image of the great gull-flocks on the shore of another time, and he knew with practiced ease that he was not bone and feather but a perfect idea of freedom and fight, limited by nothing at all. (Bach, 1970, p. 63)

- 2b. Do images of "gull-flocks on the shore" evoke familiar memories? This is a round-robin word processing activity. Take turns in your team to write the following stanzas as a dialogue between friends. Don't forget to follow the syllabic pattern as presented above in Task 1c. The first stanza is ready for you.

First stanza (5-7-5)

Between sky and earth, (5 syllables)
Seagulls become endless friends. (7 syllables)
Open feathers, free. (5 syllables)

Second stanza (7-7)

Third stanza (5-7-5)

Fourth stanza (7-7)

- 2c. Copy/paste the end poem in your group file.

2d. Now change computers by moving seats as a group. Proofread each other's group poems by highlighting the misspelled or confusing parts in red.

2e. Return to your original seats. Make the necessary corrections to your group's poem.

C. Post-writing

3. Consider the text prompts below because it is time for a "collaborative poetry challenge"! The [Young Poets Network](#) invites groups of young writers under age 25 to share their finished renga. The inspiration is what brings "smiles" and "hope" in life.

From two thousand feet he tried again, rolling into his dive, beak straight down, wings full out and stable from the moment he passed fifty miles per hour. It took tremendous strength, but it worked. In ten seconds, he has blurred through ninety miles per hour. Jonathan had set a world speed record for seagulls! (Bach, 1970, p. 20)

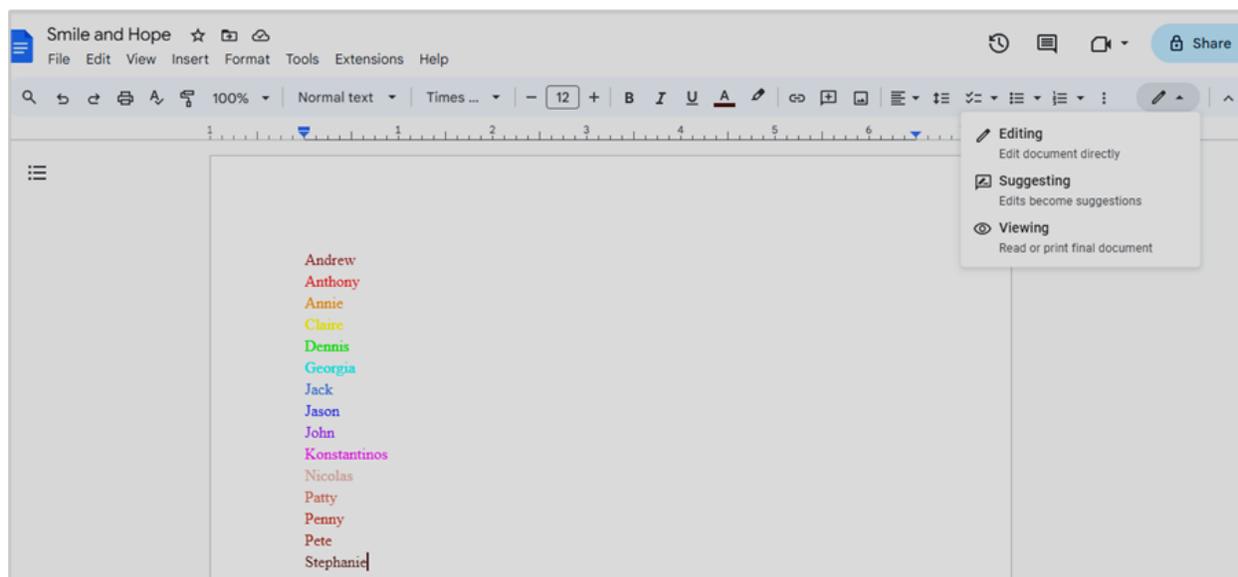
"Richard Bach with this book does two things.
He gives me Flight.
He makes me Young.
For both I am deeply grateful."

— Ray Bradbury (Bach, 1970, p. 2)

3a. Visit the above website to find out about the deadline and the rules of the competition.

3b. So what "**makes you smile**"? Or, even better, what "**makes you feel hopeful**"? Write your own poem using Jonathan Livingston Seagull as your source for inspiration.

3c. Your teacher will share with each one of you via your personal email a Google docs document with your names in different colors. Use the color of your [name](#) to share your poem with your teacher and your fellow students. After everyone has shared their poems, you can start proofreading and editing each other's work using your name's color.



3d. Read your poems aloud and discuss them in class to decide on their suitability for the competition. You may wish to put conditions on the final selection.

3e. Prepare your electronic submission to the competition with the aid of your teacher.

About the Author

Angeliki Ypsilanti is an EFL teacher in secondary education. She holds a BA degree in English Language and Literature from the University of Athens, a BA in Hispanic Language and Civilization Studies from the Hellenic Open University, and an M.Ed. in TEFL/TEIL from the Hellenic Open University. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting at Ionian University.