



# 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.

Another study conducted by [Inwood \(2011\)](#) indicated how poetry helped the writers to express their traumatic experiences. This study explored a wave of Chinese poetry published online concerning the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (“Quake Poetry”) before it emerged through digital, print and live media. Specifically, it examined the use of different media in the production of Quake Poetry, the discourse relevant to media coverage, and online discussion of these poems. Research findings showed that multimedia adaptations of earthquake poems which were previously published online involved a mixture of interests, individuals, institutions, and media technologies. The author interpreted that Quake Poetry was based on the writers’ creative consensus and emotional concerns for the earthquake and the use of different communication technologies (e.g., Internet or YouTube) helped to convey their messages around the world. [Inwood \(2011\)](#) concluded by addressing the role of poetry in China: “poetry in China possesses a long tradition of being composed to commemorate significant events, in particular in the forms of elegies to mourn the deaths of loved ones” (p. 947).

These previous studies have proposed the use of expressive forms of writing as a way to express the writers’ traumatic life experiences in a first language (L1); on the other hand, there is scant reporting on the usage of poetry writing as a way to communicate these events in a second or foreign language. These studies suggest that poetry written by advanced ESL students can be used to explore personal history; however, to date, poetic inquiry with L2 writers has been limited to rather mundane personal events such as study abroad ([Hanauer, 2010](#)). Of particular interest in L2 writing research is what happens to their identity when L2 writers are faced with traumatic events and how they construct meaning in L2 poetry. Thus overall, the question is of interest both in relation to expressive abilities of L2 writers and in relation to the traumatic events themselves.

Given these concerns, the aim of the current study was to investigate the expressive abilities of low-intermediate L2 learners related to their traumatic life events by focusing on Japanese L2 writers’ experiences of the 3.11 Earthquake. Specifically, two research questions will be addressed:

1. What are the linguistic features of English poetry written by Japanese L2 learners?
2. How is the earthquake experience characterized through poetic data written by Japanese L2 learners?

### 3. Methods

The current study employed [Hanauer’s \(2010\)](#) methodological guidelines for using poetry as a research method. The research framework consists of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of poems written by Japanese L2 learners.

#### 3.1. Research site and participants

A Japanese public university was the research site for the current study. The university is located approximately 80 miles away from central Tokyo and 240 miles away from the epicenter of the 3.11 Earthquake. The research was introduced with 82 Japanese engineering students initially registered in two sections of a freshman college English course, but four of them decided not to participate in the study, reducing the number of participants to 78 (56 male and 22 female students). Their English proficiency level ranged from approximately 380 to 440 points on the TOEFL paper-based test. They had studied English for six years since they were in the seventh grade under the Japanese educational system. In secondary school education, they had very little experience of writing and no chance to compose poems in English.

#### 3.2. Data collection procedures

Data were collected in the freshman college English reading course in the 2011 spring semester. This course was delivered as a coordinated curriculum and all instructors in the English program needed to share the same textbook and primarily teach assigned chapters every lesson. The investigator designed and taught a 15-week course by incorporating the task of poetry writing into the lessons. A typical 90-min lesson was divided into two parts: approximately 45 min for teaching the textbook and the remaining time for writing. Although the investigator was unable to spend the entire class time on the poetry writing activities, he organized a semester-long project which could be accomplished in the limited time available.

The goal of this writing project was for each participant to create a book of poetry reflecting on the 3.11 Earthquake. Each lesson served as a workshop through which L2 learners could construct their voices and express their emotions in writing based upon their personal experiences. Although the participants were encouraged to write poetry concerning the 3.11 Earthquake, they had freedom to choose and express any moment of this tragedy; on the other hand, they did not have to describe memories that they felt uncomfortable about exploring.<sup>1</sup> This measure was taken based on [Pennebaker’s \(2004\) Flip-Out Rule](#): “If you fear that you might get too upset while writing about a particular topic, don’t write about it. If you think that something will cause you to flip out, write about something else” (p. 13). As such, the project was conducted in a way that the participants would not feel further emotional pain in the process of writing about their earthquake experiences.

<sup>1</sup> Because this course began in April, which was three weeks after the participants experienced the earthquake, one important assumption at the beginning of this project was that some of them might not be ready to express and share their experiences.

This project consisted of the three stages. The first stage was to recreate the memories of the 3.11 Earthquake. In this stage, the participants reflected on ten significant moments and wrote freely about each memory in Japanese. The second stage was poetry writing. With the freewriting of their ten significant moments, the participants wrote one poem per moment in English. They composed their poems, as they liked, with no specific rules or formats. This writing exercise was a recursive process through which each participant wrote a poem, participated in peer review, and revised the poem based on feedback from the classmates. The participants also had a conference with the investigator when they finished writing their first poem. This 15-min conference was for students to discuss their poems, for the investigator to check their understanding and progress of their L2 poetry writing, and to give advice on their writing. The third stage of the project involved the creation of a book of poetry. The participants were assigned to publish their original, hand-made books consisting of a table of contents, an introduction and their ten poems.

When the participants submitted their books of poetry in the last lesson, they were given the Informed Consent Form to ask their participation in the current study. In order to reduce the research bias, the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary, it would not affect their final grade, and their poems would not be used until the investigator finished grading. The 78 participants who agreed to participate and signed the Informed Consent Form were chosen as the subjects in the current study. Thus overall, 78 books of poetry including 773 poems were collected.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis involved both computational and thematic analyses of the 773 poems written by the participants. Since each book of poetry was handwritten, it was first transcribed and transformed into a MS Word document. The ten poems in each book were given a single page with exactly the same font and the same spelling as in the original. In order to characterize L2 poetry, this study employed Hanauer's (2010) five analytical methods which were to examine text size, lexical category, lexical frequency profile, lexical content, and expressed emotion in L2 poetry writing. The computational analysis consisted of five stages and the corpus of 773 poems was analyzed with different statistical software programs.

First of all, the analysis of text size of the corpus of 773 poems involved the basic statistics of text size features including words per poem, lines per poem, stanzas per poem, and words per line. This analysis allowed the computation of average, standard deviation, and mean of each text size characteristics.

The second analysis entailed looking at the linguistic categories in the corpus of L2 poetry writing. The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) 2007 software program was used to analyze the linguistic categories. The analysis of linguistic categories at this stage was limited to the percentage of function words, pronouns (personal pronouns, first person singular/plural, second person, third person singular/plural, and impersonal pronouns) articles, common verb forms (auxiliary verbs, past tense, present tense, and expressions of futurity<sup>2</sup>), adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, negations, and quantifiers.

The third analysis involved examining the lexical richness of the poetic texts. The Range software program was used to calculate the Lexical Frequency Profile (Laufer & Nation, 1995). This software program divided the corpus into four categories depending on the frequency level: the first 1000 words, the second 1000 words, the third 1000, and not in the lists. The outcome of this computational analysis provides the percentage and total words of the corpus depending on each category.

The fourth approach entailed lexical content analysis of the corpus of the 773 poems using the Concordance software program. It allowed for the production of a list of high-frequency words, their frequency of usage, and their example contexts. In this analysis, all content words in the corpus which had a high-frequency of above 30 were listed.

The fifth analysis involved the usage of emotional words. The corpus was subjected to the LIWC 2007 software program which calculated the percentage of affective words in the 773 poems. There were 32 word categories tapping psychological constructs (e.g., social, affect, cognition, perceptual, biological processes) in the software program and the word categories which were analyzed in the corpus were affective processes including the following five subcategories: positive emotion (e.g., awesome, fun, good), negative emotion (e.g., alone, boring, sorry), anxiety (e.g., worried, fearful, nervous), anger (e.g., hate, kill, annoyed), and sadness (e.g., crying, grief, sad). In order to clarify the frequency of emotional words used in the L2 poetry in this corpus, the result of this computational analysis was compared to that in the baseline of word usage in other types of writing, emotional writing, controlled writing and novels from the study of Pennebaker, Chang, Ireland, Gonzales, and Booth (2007).

In addition to statistical analyses, this study entailed thematic analyses of the 773 poems. The usage of thematic analysis, an analytical method for "identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79) was to investigate thematic issues of the participants' earthquake experiences in Japan. The analysis consisted of six phrases of thematic analysis designed by Braun and Clarke (2006): becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The first stage of the thematic analysis involved careful reading of each poem and taking notes on any analytical observations. The second stage entailed the design of an initial coding system from the data. Each poem was re-read and then analyzed with the coding system. New codes were added, if necessary. The third stage was to search for themes. The analysis involved categorizing the coded poems and finding similarities. The fourth stage of thematic analysis was to review themes which involved confirming

<sup>2</sup> The LIWC 2007 software program has labeled futurity as "future tense", but according to Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985), English does not have a future tense. Following their linguistic terminology, this article describes it as "expressions of futurity".

**Table 1**  
Text size in L2 poetry.

Statistic	Words per poem	Lines per poem	Stanzas per poem	Words per line
Average	20.77	4.74	1.14	4.38
SD	11.99	2	0.5	1.99
Mode	13	3	1	4.00
Min	4	2	1	1
Max	98	18	5	19

whether emerged themes in the previous stage worked out. In the recursive process of combining and breaking down candidate themes, the individual theme was initially described by carefully looking at the characteristics of each theme. The fifth stage is to define and name themes. The purpose of this stage of analysis was to identify what each theme really means and to clarify how it is suited to the participants' experiences of the 3.11 earthquake. The last stage of analysis involved the report on the definition of each theme and the presentation of the summary table of themes concerning the 773 poems.

#### 4. Results

The results section of this paper first shows the characteristics of L2 earthquake poetry and then presents the participants' different types of 3.11 Earthquake experiences.

##### 4.1. The characteristics of L2 earthquake poetry

Table 1 presents the text size in the corpus of 773 poems consisting of a total of 16,037 words. As can be seen in Table 1, the L2 poems in this corpus are in general short, averaging 20.77 words per poem, 4.74 lines per poem, 1.14 stanzas per poem, and 4.38 words per line. The standard deviation and mode of words per poem also illustrate that there is some diversity as to the text length of each poem in English. The shortest poem consists of only four words and the longest one is comprised of 98 words.

Table 2 shows linguistic categories and the percentage of the total word count in the corpus of 773 poems. Several of the linguistic categories illustrate the characteristics of the L2 poetry in this corpus. First of all, first person pronouns are the most frequent category of all pronouns (7.24%). On the other hand, the use of second person pronouns accounts for only 0.51% of the total word count and that of third person pronouns is limited to 0.8% of the corpus. This implies that, although the participants had freedom to write poems from different standpoints, the L2 poetry in this corpus was written primarily from first person perspectives. Secondly, the present tense is used more frequently than either the past tense or expressions of futurity. The use of past tense is limited to 1.6% of the corpus and futurity, which refers to the usage of such modals as *will* or *gonna* accounts for only 0.49% of the total word count. This means that the L2 poetry in this corpus focuses on living in the here and now and time overlaps in these poems; in other words, there is an overlap between what happened in the past and how the participants experience those moments again in the current moment of writing. Finally, the data present the low frequency use of

**Table 2**  
Linguistic categories in L2 poetry corpus.

Linguistic categories	Percentage of total words in L2 poetry
Total function words	49.41
Total pronouns	12.42
Personal pronouns	8.28
1st person singular	6.03
1st person plural	1.21
2nd person	0.24
3rd person singular	0.27
3rd person plural	0.53
Impersonal pronouns	4.14
Articles	5.87
Common verb	15.23
Auxiliary verbs	9.45
Past tense	1.6
Present tense	12.63
Future tense	0.49
Adverbs	4.62
Prepositions	10.44
Conjunctions	4.54
Negations	3.46
Quantifiers	1.85

**Table 3**

Word frequency band and percentage of L2 poetry writing corpus.

	Number of words	Cumulative coverage (%) of whole corpus	Individual coverage (%) of whole corpus
1st 1000	12666	80.52	80.52
2nd 1000	1019	87.00	6.48
3rd 1000	211	88.34	1.34
Not in the lists	1834	100	11.66
Total	15730	–	–

conjunctions (e.g., and, but, whereas), negations (e.g., no, not, never) and quantifiers (e.g., two, thousand). This indicates that the L2 poetry in this corpus is written in a direct manner without extensive use of complicated rhetorical patterns.

Table 3 presents the number of words and the percentage of coverage concerning three frequency levels of words: 80.52% of all running words are in the 1000 most frequent word list; 87.00% of the words are seen in the 2000 most

**Table 4**

Lexical content analysis of L2 poetry corpus.

Word	Frequency of usage	Example contexts of usage
Earthquake	249	Suddenly, a strong earthquake occurs A big earthquake
People	124	People don't notice it, too Many people are shocked
Go	91	I want to go home Go to Gasoline stations
Big	76	A big wave Big, strong, powerful wave
TV	61	I can't watch TV No TV program that I want
Power	60	A power failure A nuclear power plant
Dark	59	Our feeling is dark, too My heart is dark blue
Electricity	59	No train because of saving electricity No electricity
Think	54	Think that Tohoku is not Japan We should think about our life style
Home	51	Come home from school My home is all right?
Tsunami	45	Big Tsunami comes Tsunami swallows the town
House	44	My house may be broken Staying in my house
Feel	43	Feel guilty Feel lonely
Room	42	Dark room at home In the dark room
Day	41	End of the day This situation lasts all day
Light	41	No light in my room The light of candle
Sad	41	Horrible, cruel, sad Very sad that time
Mother	39	I call my mother Mother is holding a bookshelf
Japan	35	Japan got big hurt Pray for Japan
Life	34	No electric life Anxious for victims' life
Blackout	32	Planned blackout causes traffic jam Three days blackout
Friends	32	Worry about my friends in Tohoku We play karaoke with my friends
Water	32	No food, no water Houses, cars, trees in water
Night	31	Earthquake at night Time passes and it is night
Town	31	Moon light shining a town No light in my town

**Table 5**

Percentage of words from total word count according to affective processes for L2 poetry writing and baseline emotional writing, control writing and novels (Pennebaker et al., 2007).

	Percentage of total words in L2 poetry corpus	Baseline comparison: emotional writing	Baseline comparison: control writing	Baseline comparison: novels
Affective processes	7.49	6.02	2.57	4.89
Positive emotion	3.04	3.28	1.83	2.86
Negative emotion	4.44	2.67	0.71	1.98
Anxiety	1.6	0.68	0.21	0.44
Anger	0.63	0.66	0.14	0.55
Sadness	1.29	0.63	0.14	0.57

frequent words; and 88.34% of the words are found in the 3000 most frequent words. This means that high-frequency words are used in the L2 poetry in this corpus and the usage of these words is seen as a function of general L2 proficiency. In regard to the words not listed in the 3000 most frequent words, 190 words (1.21%) included in 1834 words come from the participant's L1 usage consisting of the names of places (e.g., *Fukushima*), food (e.g., *sushi*), or specific objects (e.g., *tatami*).

Table 4 shows the results of a lexical content analysis including the content words, the frequency of usage, and the example contexts of usage. There are 26 content words listed from the order of higher frequency usage. In the whole corpus of 773 poems, some core themes and concerns of traumatic life experiences seem to be repeatedly addressed across the participants and poems. For instance, the term *earthquake*, which is the most frequently used content word in the corpus (249 times), is seen in 214 poems. Perhaps surprisingly, this means that the word appears in only about one third of the poems concerning the topic of the 3.11 Earthquake. Such words as *tsunami* or *blackout* refers to negative effects of the earthquake on daily life. More specifically, the terms, *electricity*, *light* and *water* are related to basic necessities of life, indicating how the earthquake affected the participants' post-quake lives. In addition, *room*, *town*, *home*, *house*, *day*, *night*, and *life* are used to describe the moments or situations when and/or after the earthquake occurred. A high-frequency usage of words also addresses the social relationship or closeness to *mother*, *friends*, *home*, and *house*. Furthermore, the contexts of usage in the concordance illustrate emotional elements expressed in the collection of poems. *Dark*, *sad*, and *feel* are parts of expressing emotions.

The final computational analysis involves the use of emotional words. As can be seen in Table 5, the percentage of affective processes in the corpus of 773 poems is highest of all other types of writing. Compared with the study of Pennebaker and associates (2007), the percentage of total words in this corpus of L2 poetry writing (7.49%) is much higher than in emotional writing (6.02%), which refers to the texts produced specifically for the purpose of expressing emotional responses to personally relevant topics. This implies that, regardless of the text size, poetry written by L2 writers contains their emotional insights. In relation to the breakdown of affective categories into its element, the negative emotions (4.44%) are used more frequently than positive emotions (3.04%) in this corpus of L2 poetry writing. Especially, the words concerning *anxiety* (1.6%) or *sadness* (1.29%) were frequently used and the percentage of their usage was the highest of all the baseline of emotional writing, controlled writing and novels. In addition, the use of words regarding *anger* was slightly lower than in emotional writing, but higher than the baseline of controlled writing and novels. Thus overall, the results of analyzing the usage of emotional words, high frequency content words, and their context illustrate that the L2 poetry in this corpus represents emotional responses to the poets' traumatic life experiences.

#### 4.2. Thematic issues of earthquake experiences

The second part of the results section discusses thematic issues of the earthquake experiences. It first describes the coding system and its set of internal categories, and then presents a summary table of the participants' different types of experiences related to the event.

All poems written were categorized into eleven themes: a moment when the earthquake occurs; tsunami; safety confirmation; public transport disruptions; blackout; lack of supplies; cancellation of events; leaking radiation; complaints against Japanese government; pray for evacuees; and discovery through earthquake. Each theme will be defined with specific examples from the poetic data.<sup>3</sup>

The first theme is related to *moments when the earthquake occurs*. It involves poems describing a particular moment when the earthquake occurs and that express each writer's emotional responses. The following poem depicts a scene in which the ground starts quaking when the poet practices driving a car in driving school and, while wondering why he cannot drive straight, he gradually understands the situation looking outside from the car.

<sup>3</sup> The poems shown as specific examples were written by different students.

**At Driving School**

In a driving school,  
Feeling quake while driving a car  
“Why shaking”

A male instructor gently says,  
“Drive straight!!”  
But a black steering is straight.  
Nothing wrong with me.

“It’s earthquake ... earthquake, isn’t it?” he says.  
“Move, ... move the car to the side of the road” he hurriedly says.

Parking it at the side of the road  
Seeing electronic wires swinging from side to side  
When does it stop?

*Tsunami* is the second theme in the earthquake event. This thematic poem describes a moment when the poet watched the news on TV, in which the tsunami swallows people, houses, or towns in devastated areas. The following poem illustrates the point while expressing the poet’s surprise or confusion for the scene of tsunami on TV.

**Menace of Tsunami**

Watch tsunami on TV  
A very high wave  
And it’s fast and dark  
Destroys many structures  
There is nothing after it passes

I lose my words  
Can’t speak  
Can’t believe it.

The third issue of the earthquake is *safety confirmation*. The theme addresses the difficulty in contacting family, friends, classmates, or teachers through any electronic devices and involves the poet’s expression of positive and negative emotions (e.g., the relief to reach family, the anxiety for being unable to get in touch with family). The following poem describes a moment when the poet can finally get in touch with her father after her continuous attempts to call him. It also expresses her relief by confirming his safety.

**Contact**

I am at home with my mom when there is a big earthquake.  
I try to get in touch with my dad.  
But I can’t use home phone because of a blackout.  
So I try to use cellphone, but it says,  
“つながりません<sup>4</sup>” on the screen.

It is getting dark little by little.  
Still try to reach my dad  
Suddenly my cell phone that I have with a hand starts to shake.  
“Are you okay?” my dad say.  
“We are fine.” I say  
Very short time, but his voice relieves me.

*Public transport disruptions* is the fourth theme in the earthquake poetry. This thematic poem is related to the disruption of public transportation caused by the earthquake including traffic jams, train delays, or restricted bus service. The following poem describes a situation in which the poet keeps waiting for a bus and finally sees it approaching the bus stop.

<sup>4</sup> “つながりません” means that “It’s out of service”.



**Wonder if the bus comes**

Waiting for bus at a bus stop  
5 minutes...  
I don't see anything.

10 minutes...  
I don't see anything.

20 minutes...  
I see something

Finally, Finally  
Bus comes!!

The fifth theme is *blackout*. It is based on the participants' lives after the earthquake with a very limited amount of electricity or under blackout situations. Each poem expresses the writer's state of mind as a response to the power failure. The next poem describes an unusual scene in which a blackout situation happens in a town.

**Untitled**

No light around  
No car around  
No people around  
That night is more quieter than usual  
A little lonely

*Lack of supplies* is another important issue in the catastrophic event. It is related to poems addressing a lack of basic necessities of life such as food, water, gasoline or toilet papers. It also depicts a situation where all supplies are gone from grocery stores and people are panicked. The next poem, *Supermarket* is written with the poet's observation in a grocery store while expressing his surprise at an unusual situation in which nothing is on the shelves.

**Supermarket**

Going to supermarket  
No rice,  
No food,  
No bread,  
On the shelf

Make me surprised  
Hope foods come back to the shelf soon.

The seventh theme is the *cancellation of events*. This thematic poem involves the cancellation of school events, family events, or other events with the poet's friends due to the earthquake. In Japan, the academic year starts in April and ends in March so that many events are scheduled around personal (e.g., a high school graduation trip) and social (e.g., university entrance examination) time periods. The poem below expresses the poet's negative responses, such as sadness or disappointment, at the cancellation of the university entrance ceremony.

**Untitled**

Really looking forward to entrance ceremony  
Really wanting to wear a black-striped suit  
It's the beginning of my new life

But,  
Japan University<sup>5</sup> decides to cancel the ceremony  
My negative feeling just stays in my heart

<sup>5</sup> The author has changed the name of the university.

*Leaking radiation* is another issue surrounding the earthquake experiences. This theme is related to the leaking of radiation at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plants caused by tsunami. Each poem expresses the poet's reaction to the leaking of radiation including his or her anxiety or fear of negative impacts on the human body. The next poem, *Spinach* addresses this issue by describing the negative effects of radiation on agricultural crops:

***Spinach***

My mother's friend comes home  
She gives us a lot of spinach

They look beautiful  
They look so delicious

However, they can't ship  
The reason is  
Radioactive contamination.

*Complaints against mass media* is the ninth theme of the earthquake experiences. This issue is related to the poet's direct reactions to the news on TV, information provided by the Japanese government or its measures in response to the earthquake, tsunami, and the accident in the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plants. The following poem expresses the poet's confusion and even anger at the news on the leak of radiation and the Japanese government's measures to address the accident.

***Japanese government***

Powerless leader  
Media confuse people  
Government hides  
Radiation information

What do you mean?

No idea what to do.  
What should I do?  
Why don't they tell us the truth?

The next topic is *hope, prayer, and positive action to evacuees*. This theme consists of the poet's expression of positive emotions to move towards the future. It includes his or her encouragement to evacuated people, prayers for people who suffer from a series of catastrophic events, hopes for the future of Japan, and devoted work to support those suffering people (e.g., volunteering, fund raising). The next poem, *Look up!* represents the poet's positive feeling to move forward for the future while reflecting on the current situation:

***Look up!***

People are in surprise  
People are in sad.

But, people take action quietly  
And strongly.

For oneself,  
For our own companion,  
And for the future

The last theme is *discovery through earthquake experiences*. This theme involves the poet's new concerns or realizations through experiencing an unusual and inconvenient life caused by the earthquake. It includes the value of ordinary life, the importance of electricity and its devices (e.g., radio or traffic light), the meaning of emergency evacuation drills in school, or the significance of having a spirit of cooperation. The following poem addresses the poet's discovery of how precious it was to live an ordinary life before the earthquake.

**Untitled**

Everyday life  
 We think it continues forever  
 We think it is natural

But it was special ...

It is valuable ...

#### 4.3. Theme summary table

Table 6 shows the frequency counts and percentages of 773 earthquake poems written by the participants regarding their different types of experiences in the catastrophic event.

As shown in Table 6, L2 earthquake poems are categorized into eleven types of experiences. 20.31% of the L2 poetry in this corpus describes a moment when the participants were feeling the quake on the ground. In addition, the theme of tsunami covers 6.08%, and 5.30% of the poems address the issue of the leak of radiation from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plants. This means that approximately one-third of the L2 poetry in the corpus directly addressed the disasters caused by the 3.11 Earthquake. Table 6 also illustrates the influence of the earthquake on the poets' lives. For instance, 13.20% of poetry involves the issue of blackout, and the theme of confirming the safety of their family and friends covers 11.00%. Furthermore, though it is a low percentage, some participants describe the issue of a lack of supplies (8.41%) and event cancellation (7.24%) in their poems. This suggests that 40% of poetry represents negative impacts of the earthquake, especially describing how difficult it is to live ordinary lives.

On the other hand, and rather surprisingly, the analysis represented by Table 6 also uncovers the participants' positive emotions in the form of resilience in the face of the earthquake. 12.29% of poetry expresses the poets' hope, prayer and action to victims in devastated areas and 10.61% involves their discovery through the earthquake and the post-quake life. This means that a good proportion of participants tended to reconsider what they learned in through the series of traumatic events, attempt to understand their own situations, and try to take positive actions for the future.

## 5. Discussion

Following Hanauer's (2010) theoretical position on the use of poetry as a research method, the current study had two principal objectives:

1. to define the linguistic features of L2 poetry written by Japanese L2 learners;
2. to describe Japanese L2 writers' different types of earthquake experiences through poetic data.

As for the first objective of this study, the analysis of the data allows for the identification of the characteristics of L2 poetry as represented in the corpus. The data show that the L2 poems consisted of a short text using simple and high-frequency words of English language. The average length of this poetic text was 20.77 words, 4 words per line, 5 lines per poem and consisting of 1 stanza. 87% of the vocabulary in the texts comes from the 2000 most frequently used words in the English language. The texts include some Japanese words referring to the participants' L1 use, but it is limited to 1.21%. These linguistic features present evidence that low-intermediate L2 writers can handle poetry writing in the target language.

The data also show some specific characteristics of poetry written by Japanese L2 writers. The use of first person pronouns and little use of conjunctions, negations, or quantifiers, and the usage of affective words indicate that the poetry represents Japanese L2 writers' emotional responses to their personal experiences without any complicated linguistic and rhetorical

**Table 6**  
 Thematic issues of earthquake experiences.

Themes	Frequency (N = 773)	Percentage
1. The moment when the earthquake occurs	157	20.31%
2. Tsunami	47	6.08%
3. Safety confirmation	85	11.00%
4. Public transport disruptions	21	2.72%
5. Power-failure/Blackout	102	13.20%
6. Lack of supplies	65	8.41%
7. Cancellation of events	56	7.24%
8. Leaking radiation	41	5.30%
9. Complaints against mass media	22	2.85%
10. Hope, prayer and positive action to evacuees	95	12.29%
11. Discovery through earthquake experiences	82	10.61%

styles. Also, the frequent use of content words such as *home*, *house*, *room*, *day*, *life*, *night* or *town* makes earthquake poetry descriptive; in other words, the writers capture a specific moment in a series of earthquake experiences. In addition, of particular importance in the data is to identify emotion in language use. The use of affective words in the corpus of L2 poetry writing was more frequent than in emotional writing, controlled writing and novels reported by Pennebaker et al. (2007). This indicates that these L2 writers used the opportunity of poetry writing to express their emotional responses to this traumatic life event. It is not surprising that positive emotions were used less frequently than negative emotions because of the theme of poetry of the project. Such emotional words as *feel*, *sad* and *dark* were frequently used to express emotions in this corpus of L2 poetry writing. Along with the expression of negative emotions, these writers tended to explore their personal relationships with family (e.g., *mother*) and *friends* and social closeness to their *home* or *house* in their earthquake experiences. This finding supports previous studies of poetry and L2 writers indicating that poetry writing allows L2 learners to explore their significant memories (Hanauer, 2010); on the other hand, it clarifies that low-intermediate L2 writers can express and communicate deeply traumatic experiences in poetry writing.

While the computational analysis of the data illuminates the characteristics of the L2 poetry in this corpus, there were also some unique stylistic issues of Japanese L2 writers revealed through analysis. One feature is the usage of Japanese language in English poems. As shown in the poem, *Contact*, the Japanese L2 writer uses a Japanese phrase “つながりません” in the fifth line in the first stanza. Rather than representing a gap in the participants’ interlanguage, such usage was frequently more along the lines of expressing a “unique biliterate voice” based on the L2 writer’s “flexible dual language word choice and phraseology” (Fu & Matoush, 2006, p. 25). It is natural that L2 writers attempt to use English when they are assigned to write in the target language. In this poem, however, the writer used this Japanese phrase with a double quotation. This can be seen as the representation of the writer’s intentional use of Japanese language in the text. There is no doubt that she could translate the phrase into English (e.g., It’s out of service), but she decided to use Japanese characters to explain the phrase instead of letters in her text. It seems that it was the phrase that she actually saw on her cell phone screen in the emergency situation and that reminded her of the moment when she tried to reach her father several times. In short, the Japanese phrase in the poem had significant meaning for the L2 writer to recreate, visualize and express her earthquake experience.

Another feature is the usage of punctuation in the L2 poetry. The collection of poems shows the random use of punctuation marks by different Japanese students. A prominent feature is the use of a three-dot leader ( ... ). As shown in the poems, *At Driving School*, and *Wonder if the bus comes*, each Japanese student deliberately used this punctuation. This seems not simply to omit a word but to express the passage of time, the silence, or the process of thinking more carefully in each moment. The punctuation that is used as part of the construction of the writer’s voice is attributed to Japanese written rhetoric, which is characterized as “indirect, implicit and inductive” (Kubota, 1999, p. 12; McKinley, 2014, p. 309). This rhetorical style is very familiar to Japanese students. In fact, the punctuation marks are often used in novels or other expressive forms of writing in Japanese such as L1 reading textbooks, and with these literary works, Japanese students are trained to read the lines and understand the message behind the texts. They also experience expressive writing—writing about their personal experiences and emotions in their L1 in primary and/or secondary education (Hirose, 2001; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002). Reflecting on these literacy practices, they are inclined to use the punctuation in their self-reflective essays in Japanese, especially in journal writing or emailing to their friends or colleagues. In this light, the usage of punctuation is viewed as a transfer of L1 knowledge to L2 poetry writing. For low-intermediate Japanese L2 writers, this may be a way to compensate for the limitation of L2 linguistic knowledge in the process of constructing and expressing their voices in the target language.

In relation to the second objective of this study, the data reflect each writer’s different types of experiences concerning the 3.11 Earthquake. A major concern of the writers in this study was the earthquake itself. 20.3% of the poetry describes the scenes in which the earthquake is occurring. *Earthquake* is the most frequently used content word (249 times) in the corpus of 773 poems and occurs in 214 poems or 27.7% of all of the poems. However, while foreign media tended to report on the issue of the tsunami and radiation at the macro and social level, these Japanese L2 writers were more interested in the influence of the earthquake on their daily lives at the micro and individual level. The results of thematic analysis show that the poems addressing the issue of tsunami and radiation are limited to 11.4%, but 42.6% of the poems involve how the earthquake affected participants’ post-quake lives. This implies that the students’ hometowns and high schools might be far from the most devastated areas and there were very few direct and immediate influences of tsunami or radiation on their lives. For that reason, the issue of the blackout, the public transport disruption, the lack of basic necessities of life, the cancellation of events, and the safety confirmation of their family or friends seemed, to Japanese L2 writers, more important to them than the problem of tsunami or radiation.

The results of the thematic analysis of L2 poetry also reveal Japanese students’ positive emotions through expressions of their resilience in reaction to this traumatic event, a dimension uncovered through computational analysis. 13% of the L2 poetry in this corpus addresses their hope, prayers, and action to support victims who suffer from devastated areas. More specifically, the collection of poetry consists of the story of solidarity, encouragement and perhaps most importantly, will. It seems that the Japanese L2 writers tried to understand and accept the given situation in which they luckily survived and managed to live their lives with family while the victims had physically and mentally suffered from this disaster. As Japanese, they appeared to consider what they could do for victims or devastated areas at the personal level, and take such a positive action as fund-raising, volunteering and saving water or electricity after the disaster.

The current study reveals that poetry written by L2 learners depicts visual and sensory details of the traumatic life experiences and addresses the emotionality of these described moments. It captures various scenes in a series of earthquake events—from the moment of the quake to the on-going survival situation in the devastated areas and/or other parts of the

country-to address personal, social, and cultural issues surrounding L2 writers. In this sense, personal life stories written by L2 learners are “not to be seen simply as a medium of communication, but more importantly are themselves viewed as experience” (Jung, 2009, p. 59). In other words, poetry communicates the emotional messages of the writers as well as articulates how they understand and respond to the event. This study suggests the potential of poetry writing as a way to explore personal life stories: the writing of “personal stories makes witnessing possible” and it enables “participants and readers to observe and, consequently, better testify on behalf of an event, problem, or experience” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 8; Hanauer, 2012b, p. 845).

The contribution of the current study to the field of applied linguistics is to expand our knowledge of poetry and L2 writers. As discussed above, poetic inquiry with L2 writers has been limited to advanced ESL students’ exploration of their study abroad experiences. The current study provides evidence that low-intermediate EFL students can handle the expression of their personal life experiences through poetry and suggests that L2 poetry writing can be used to explore traumatic events. Each poem written by these Japanese L2 learners represents their personal, emotional responses to their earthquake experiences. Their voices are constructed and expressed in poetic forms as a result of their linguistic and reflective negotiation for their life experiences. In this sense, the task of poetry writing allows L2 learners to reflect on and recreate significant moments, represent their emotional concerns in the scenes, and better understand their experiences.

There are some pedagogical issues that L2 writing teachers need to take into consideration. One of the ramifications of teaching poetry writing is the selection of the topic. The current study focused on Japanese students’ traumatic experiences and they were assigned to write poems reflecting on the 3.11 Earthquake. However, it may be true that some L2 writers do not want to share or are not ready to express their deeply traumatic experiences in the classroom. As an alternative approach, L2 writing teachers can have students choose their own topics for poetry writing. Like Hanauer’s (2010) teaching practice, the exploration of significant memories in their lives can be an easier and more feasible task for L2 writers. This topic can enable them to reflect on and express both positive and negative experiences defined as significant and meaningful by each writer. Another ramification of teaching poetry writing in the L2 composition classroom is teacher feedback. As discussed above, poetry writing remains an unfamiliar and challenging task to many L2 learners, especially low-proficiency or less-experienced writers. Of particular importance in this context is for the teachers to understand whether L2 writers feel attached to their poems and if not, to help them to express themselves accurately – in a phenomenological sense and not necessarily a linguistic sense – in English. From this perspective, L2 writing teachers need to consider effective ways to provide feedback through which L2 writers can polish their poems. As employed in the current study, an effective approach is a teacher–student conference. Discussing the poems in the conference can enable the teachers to appreciate what each of the writers wants to say in the text, give them comments in terms of how accurately they can express their experiences, and properly guide them in revising the poems. The teacher–student conference may be time-consuming, but L2 writers need close guidance from teachers until they get used to the task of poetry writing. In order to make poetry writing successful in the L2 writing classroom, teachers need to consider when, how long, and at what stage they could hold such meetings.

The current study was conducted in a limited context (e.g., the restriction of class time) and there is only limited data that addresses the features of L2 poetry. However, even in consideration of these limitations, the study provides a description of the characteristics of poetry written by L2 writers and provides evidence of the ability of low-intermediate L2 learners to express and understand quite extreme personal events through poetry writing.

## 6. Conclusions

The aim of the current study was to investigate the ability of L2 writers to express traumatic life experiences in poetic forms. Poetry written by L2 learners in this study was characterized as short, personal, direct, and descriptive. It also revealed L1 transfer effects such as the influence of Japanese linguistic and rhetorical knowledge on L2 poetic texts. The earthquake poetry presented here described a series of traumatic events from L2 writers’ viewpoints and represented their direct responses and emotional concerns for their traumatic life experiences. To conclude, this study gives support to the assertion that L2 writers, even at the levels of ability such as the participants in this study, can successfully communicate their experiences relating to traumatic events through poetry. It furthermore exemplifies the usage of poetry writing not only as a form of literacy practice in the L2 classroom, but as a way to explore personal life experiences.

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