

The Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC): A Way to Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

The Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC) is an English composition contest in which contestants write 50-word stories of any sort. It was originated by Peter Hassall in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and was imported to Japan by Nobuyuki Honna. The competition was administered for the first time in Japan by the Japanese Association for Asian Englishes as an event to commemorate its 10th anniversary, and has been administered every year since 2006. The competition has developed into an international event, inviting not only Japanese writers of English but also Chinese, Far East Russians and Korean users of English. A participation in the contest provides learners of English with wonderful educational experience: they have an opportunity to write creatively about what they feel like writing about, learn to devise ways to express their thoughts in 50 words, have a chance to read extremely short stories written by other domestic and international writers, feel inspired by these stories with the writers' cultural and social influences, and may get awarded for the excellencies of their own stories. This paper discusses the basic concept of the ESSC, describes the participants and their works, and its educational effect and future possibilities of its development as well as how it could manifest itself as a way of intercultural communication.

Keywords: ESSC, JAFEA, creative writing, extremely short stories

Introduction

A simple introduction of a “good” teaching/learning theory or method from a foreign classroom may hardly work in our own. The teaching/learning environment may be too different from that of its origin, or the students may have very different and unique interests, motives, skills and tendencies. The Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC), although it was created in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and brought to Japan, has proven to be a truly meaningful opportunity for Japanese learners of English to write a creative story as *short* as exactly 50 words.

The concern of this paper, therefore, is to discuss the ESSC, which is in its 4th year in Japan. The paper mainly discuss the basic concept of the story-writing as well as the competition, and some educational effects of the ESSC on learners of the English language in Japan. The author strongly believes that the ESSC has greatly contributed to those who were involved in the competition in various ways, and will continue to do so not only in Japan but also elsewhere.

The Background

The concept of writing 50-word-long English stories was originated by Peter Hassall of Zayed University, UAE. He developed it into a competition, so that his students could both practice English writing and get awarded for their performances. Therefore, the first ESSC ever took place in UAE in 2004. Soon, the idea was introduced to Japan by Nobuyuki Honna, who presides over the Japanese Association for Asian Englishes (JAF AE). The JAF AE decided to take the responsibility of administering the ESSC in Japan as part of the commemorative events for celebrating the association's 10th anniversary. Since 2006, the JAF AE has been sponsoring the competition with the support of several educational organizations. Their support enables the JAF AE to award outstanding works.

The Management of the ESSC

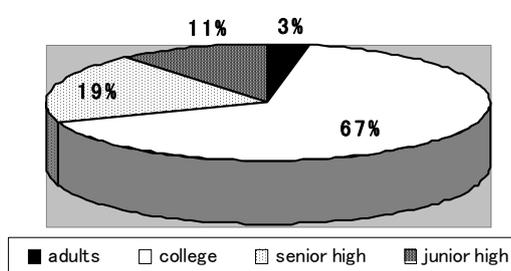
For the first three years, 2006, 2007 and 2008, the ESSC Japan conformed itself to the ESSC UAE in that all works should be submitted digitally in Power Point files. Starting in 2009, participants in the ESSC do not have to prepare a Power Point file but may type their stories onto the entry form. In either way, the technical environment has to be kept in good condition, so that stories should be accepted through the website 24 hours a day for three consecutive months during the contest. While the ESSC UAE accepts entries exclusively from university students, the ESSC Japan is open to all English learners residing in specific countries and regions at any level, from junior high school students to elderly citizens. This makes the background of the participants diverse and varied, and therefore requires the Steering Committee to be alert to questions and suggests all the time by e-mail. All the entries that have met the ESSC requirements are uploaded every week.

The winners are selected through several screening processes; a preliminary screening by members of the ESSC Steering Committee, the semi-final screening by JAF AE board members, and the final screening by four judges appointed by the Steering Committee. At any stage of the screening, we intentionally do not present the judges with a clear standard for evaluation, except that a story should be original and creative, and grammatically comprehensible. No points are given to any artistic effect of the Power Point file. The screening usually takes a few months and then the winners are awarded on the website. The prizes are sent out within one month after the announcement.

Participants and their Stories

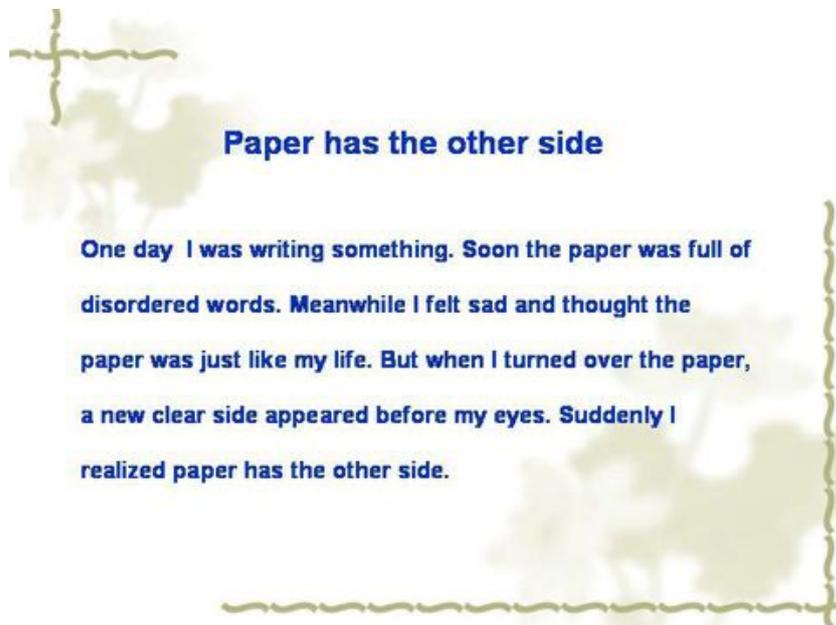
Figure 1 illustrates the participants in the ESSC 2006, when the contest was not yet known to as many people as it is today. A great majority of entries came from college students. This does not necessarily mean that composing a 50-word story was too difficult for high school students; it partially had something to do with the environment they were in that not all public high schools allowed students to have free access to the Internet on the school premises. In an effort to increase the number of younger participants, therefore, we have made it easier for them to send their stories such as allowing them to use postal service instead of the Internet. It seems important, in case of high schools, to ask for teachers' involvement in order to have their students participate in this kind of story-writing activities.

Figure 1: Participants in 2006



Here are prize-winning stories for the collage/adult section in 2007 and 2008. "Paper has the other side," written by a Chinese male student residing in Dalian, China, won the first prize in

2007, and “Weeds,” a work by a Japanese female student in southern part of Japan, won the same prize in 2008. These stories have been awarded not exclusively because they had better grammar and organization than other stories; the points they were making, the message they were conveying, the way they appealed to the readers, all these facets led them to the prizes.



An English teacher might by instinct feel like improving their students' stories. Indeed, many entries have lost in the competition because of flaws that were too serious to be overlooked in terms of fluency and/or grammatical comprehensiveness. At the same time, it is true that winners got the prizes not because their English was better, and it is equally true that grammatically flawless stories were not always ranked high unless they had other attractive characteristics. The fact that stories written by native speakers of English have not always won a prize.

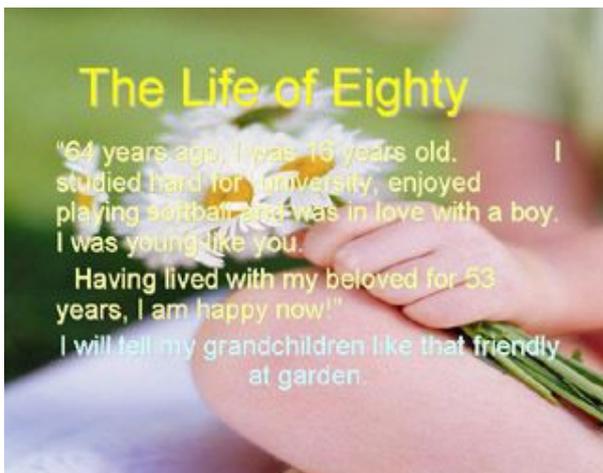
Weeds

I see small weeds next to big and beautiful flowers.
They are not conspicuous figures,
but they bloom dignifiedly.
Even if it rains or the wind blows,
they are not frightened, rather they become stronger than before.
They are tough and beautiful and shining.
I want to be like them.

Here is one of the award-winning stories in the senior high school section in 2006. “The Life of Eighty” at a glance reads as if it were a combination of recollection and expectation of an elderly lady who is about to tell her story to her young relative. This alone gives the reader a sense of warm and happy life. The reader is amazed to know, however, that a 16-year-old girl wrote this imaginary story about her life which could or could not turn out to be true in 64

years' time. The reader, therefore, cannot help wishing her life to be as satisfactory as the one she has imagined.

The last example, among many young writers, was written by a gentleman in his 60s, and awarded the second prize for the college/adult section in 2006. This story actually goes back several decades in the writer's life to talk about a childhood friend whom he stopped seeing a long time ago. Participation of an elderly person in the ESSC with a high prize is truly encouraging not only to young students but also adult English learners/users in general



The Life of Eighty

"64 years ago, I was 16 years old.
studied hard for university, enjoyed
Playing softball and was in love with a boy.
I was young like you.
Having lived with my beloved for 53



You and I were childhood friends

About 60 years ago, we were
childhood friends.
We always played together with
blocks, playing house and tag.
We also quarreled. But when
you

The ESSC as an Educational Activity

The ESSC Japan has been taking place with many participants at different levels. In accordance with the fact that Japanese English learners have been more varied than ever, involving little children and elderly people in retirement, the ESSC could manifest itself as a wonderful goal for a large population of English learners to aim at. Providing as many people as possible who take interest in studying English with some creative writing experience is one of the reasons why the JAF AE decided to hold the competition open to a wider population of English learners. We could have otherwise restricted the participants to college and university students to make the management of the contest simpler and easier.

Needless to say, composing an extremely short story is an authentic experience for all the participants, which is not always the case in the English learning environment in Japan.

Hassall (2006) emphasizes the importance of the authenticity and the resulting effect of writing extremely short stories in one of his essays:

There is a danger that our students' writing becomes meaningful only as far as it ends up in the assessment archives of our universities and colleges. The Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC), as introduced here, provides an educational event designed to fulfill a very real need of our student writers by offering a safe, secure environment where their voices can be heard by a much wider audience than is usually available, even from within the language classroom. (p. 90)

In many contests and competitions that involve English learning activities, whether they be a speech contest, a recitation contest, or an essay contest, it seems customary that only the selected works are presented to the public for appreciation. However, the extremely short stories, once submitted, are displayed on the website for anybody who visited the site. They may be read by the world readers who could receive various messages of the writers conveyed in those 50 words. Such a way of presentation could be an exciting and thrilling experience for the writers of the stories, giving them an opportunity to "interact" with the world users of English.

As far as the level of difficulty of writing an extremely short story is concerned, it could be a challenging experience for junior high school students; writing an English paragraph that is as *long* as 50 words may not be a familiar task for them. At the same time, however, it holds true that a creation of an extremely short story can never seem too strange and too difficult for these young students because they have been used to reading stories much longer than 50 words in their textbooks and elsewhere. Senior high school students, on the other hand, have had more experience in writing more and longer sentences than those junior high school students are used to.

The ESSC gives people a good opportunity to write creatively. The only restriction is the number of words they are allowed to write. This type of free writing is not frequently done in Japanese classrooms; students are often provided with themes and topics to write about, with sections or chapters of a textbook to summarize or comment on, or even with Japanese sentences for them to translate. The ESSC, therefore, is a very good way to give them productive and creative experiences.

Concluding Remarks

Thus, the ESSC has been regarded as a unique and meaningful opportunity. Many stories are colorful, interesting, creative and painstaking. Many entrants, varied in age, skill and experience, have participated in the event and found it significantly challenging. Moreover, it is an event that is supported by various educational organizations both financially and psychologically. We have been trying to further develop the competition on an international basis. After the ESSC 2006, which was held domestically, the ESSC in 2007 started accepting entries from writers of English residing in China. The ESSC in 2008 had participants from Far East Russia, and the most recent competition welcomes stories by English users in Korea. With digital entries through the Internet, an international event like this may be held without much difficulty.

In an international situation, participants in the ESSC could have a clearer awareness of writing extremely short stories from their own cultural perspectives, because they know that international readers are enjoying their stories on the Internet. Writing to communicate internationally will be a rewarding experience for many young students who are sure to be communicating in English in the future with people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. By comparing their stories with Chinese stories in the second ESSC Japan, they can recognize differences that might have arisen from cultural differences; the Chinese topics may be quite different from their own, the way Chinese writers describe their interests could be quite unique, and the impressions the Chinese stories give may prove to be quite new and surprising. The Chinese writers of English, of course, should learn many things vice versa, and so should Russian and Korean users of English. The ESSC International will contribute to a lot of users of English, or rather, users of Englishes.

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About the Presenter

Yuko Takeshita received an M.A. in Education from the University of California at Davis, teaches English and organizes relevant courses for international communication and understanding. As a founding member of the Japanese Association for Asian Englishes, she has focused on intercultural communication between Thai and Japanese people. She has been an editor of *Asian Englishes*, has worked as a researcher for the Education Ministry and as the director of a municipal Board of Education. Currently, she is a professor in the Department of Social Sciences, Toyo Eiwa University, Japan. *Emial: 2222@jcom.home.ne.jp*