

Comparing choice of themes by Emirati and Japanese students writing for the Extremely Short Story Competition

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight contrasts between the writing of young people in the UAE and Japan. For comparison, anthologies of 50-word short stories written in English, resulting from the Extremely Short Story Competition (ESSC) in each country are examined. These two ESSC anthologies were created under similar conditions in 2006. Analysis of the most frequently-appearing topics in each ESSC anthology provides insights into the daily life, general mindsets, behavior, preferences, values and culture of these two groups. These data help us to understand the everyday life and social context of young people in the UAE and Japan. Thematic analysis shows that youth in both countries are often preoccupied with seeking identity, and regard friends to be important. Both groups of young people also appear to appreciate the beauty of nature and feel affection towards living creatures. An identifying characteristic of Emirati youth is that they talk about death more often than do the Japanese writers; in addition, the ESSC anthologies indicate UAE society is remarkably family-oriented, with life being firmly connected to Islam and God. In contrast, Japanese youth show they are keen to engage in various hobbies and also like to express their romantic feelings and thankfulness for their environment. The ESSC was originally designed to develop students' creative writing in English. This study explains that corpora generated by the ESSC may be used to illuminate the lives and societies of students living in disparate countries, with implications for planning and delivering locally appropriate education.

Introduction

This paper is written from the perspective of a female native Japanese professional, born and raised in Japan, who was the Japanese and Karate teacher at a university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from 2006 to 2012. The paper will focus primarily on examining short pieces of writing authored by UAE nationals in order to provide a non-Arab, non-Western outsider's perspective on the mindset of local Emirati students in this young, small, and somewhat enigmatic country. A secondary focus will contrast insights gleaned from examining writing produced by UAE student-authors with that of a comparable cohort of Japanese students undertaking a similar task in Japan at the time when the present author was absent from Japan and living in the UAE. Naturally, this study provides only the barest introduction to the choice of themes which students chose to engage with and the cultural context in which they appeared; however, it is hoped that this paper will encourage other researchers to develop more in-depth studies, perhaps drawing on some of the methodological procedures outlined here.

In order to provide insights into the society and personal motivations of Emirati citizens living in the UAE, the author accessed a published anthology of nearly 1,500 pieces of writing. Each micro-text was exactly fifty words in length and authored by an Emirati student in higher education. Entitled *Pearls of Emirati Wisdom* (Hassall, 2007), the anthology was compiled subsequent to what was termed the 'Extremely Short Story Competition' (ESSC – Hassall, 2006, also outlined in the current journal: Hassall, 2011). This was the second volume of 50-word ESSC stories published from Zayed University following

an Extremely Short Story Competition, with this ESSC being open to female and male students from government higher education institutions from all the major urban areas of the UAE.

At about the same time in Japan, a parallel collection of 50-word ESSC stories had been assembled by the Japanese Association for Asian Englishes (JAF AE) under the presidency of Professor Nobuyuki Honna of Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo. A close relationship developed between the Japan and UAE ESSC's, which led to Yasuhiro Fujiwara of JAF AE's ESSC Steering Committee forwarding an ESSC collection of 50-word compositions by Japanese students to Hassall at Zayed University, Dubai where they were compiled into an anthology entitled *Rays of the Rising Sun* (Hassall & Hassall, 2007).

These two parallel anthologies, *Pearls of Emirati Wisdom* and *Rays of the Rising Sun* will be referred to henceforth in this paper respectively as *Pearls* and *Sun* for ease of reference. The ESSC stories collected in both UAE and Japan complied with the primary regulation of the ESSC, requiring authors to write exactly 50 words, which could be "fact or fiction; poetry or prose" (Hassall, 2006). This stipulation allowed almost any type of writing to be submitted, acting as a motivation to produce a focused piece of writing with any themes or style (not necessarily a narrative). In both the UAE and Japan, the word 'story' was used in promoting and explaining the ESSC, in order to encourage even students with a basic level of written English to participate (it was considered that using other terms such as 'piece of writing' or 'text' might deter many students from participating in the ESSC). The resulting set of text is admirably suited for comparison of multiple themes arising in collections of text authored by students of varied English ability from different cultures.

Pearls and *Sun* were assembled under similar conditions, both being compiled from responses of individual students to an Extremely Short Story Competition delivered online, with students giving their consent that their work would be proofread, edited, put on display, published (on the internet or in book form) and used for academic research. In both the UAE and Japan approximately 500 female and male student-authors, mostly in their latter teenage years and early twenties, submitted self-authored text as stipulated on themes of their own choice in whatever style they chose. After reading *Pearls* and *Sun*, many similarities were found in the student-authors' theme choice from each country. At the same time, salient differences were also observed. This study attempts to explore the main apparent concerns of these young people, who will bear the country's future in the UAE and Japan, and to explore their society and personal interests by analyzing their theme choice in *Pearls* and *Sun*.

The reason to compare UAE with Japan is that there are considerable similarities and differences between two countries. Both countries are non-Western, modernized countries with ruling families; both are labeled as 'very high human development' in the Human Development Index by the United Nations Development Program, and attain 100% primary education enrolment (UNDP, 2015). As for the differences, Japan has a national population of 127 million and has 1,700 years of recorded history; most nationals follow Buddhism and/or Shinto, the indigenous Japanese religion. The political system is a parliamentary democracy with the emperor as a symbol of the unity of the people. The UAE, on the other hand, has achieved a similar standard of living in just 45 years of history; it has 1.4 million nationals, almost all of whom follow Islam. The political system is a federation of sheikhdoms with limited parliamentary government. We hope that the results of this study will contribute new perspectives on this generation of student-authors in both countries.

Background to the study and methodology

Since its formation in 1971, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has transformed dramatically from a nomadic desert society into a modern nation. Nowadays, the UAE attracts many foreign investors,

business people and travellers, making it easy to obtain economic and commercial information about the UAE in English and other languages. Despite all of that, relatively little is published about the personal concerns of UAE citizens, also known as Emiratis.

Study of literature, including stories and poems, can provide a useful pointer to help comprehend a particular society and the perspectives of its writers; however, when collecting data on Emirati people in general, it is not an easy matter to obtain data from literature related to what Emirati people write (Shaker, 2011). There are a number of reasons for this scarcity. Firstly, the UAE is a country with a relatively small population of Emirati citizens which, according to Reuters (2013), reached an estimated 1.4 million in 2013. Secondly, the scarcity of literary work produced by UAE citizens may well be the result of traditional Emirati mores related to culture and education. Noori Shaker, an Emirati novelist, states that an oral culture prevailed until the 1960s, and the development of lengthy local literary creations such as the novel is a very recent phenomenon (Shaker, 2011: p.33). In addition, the country itself is still new in the world. At its establishment in 1971, the illiteracy rate was as high as 75 percent even in the capital city Abu Dhabi (*The National*, 2012); there has not been long enough for secondary and tertiary education to become sufficiently developed to produce a broad culture of writing. Prior to the formation of the UAE, education emphasized memorization of the Qur'an and did not pay a great deal of attention to students' written composition or creative writing (Seto, 2011: p.98). Even today, the creative production of short stories and/or novels is not highlighted in basic education (Matsubara, 2013). To date, the UAE has only produced a relatively small number of literary works, and the number of works readily available in English is extremely limited.

Pioneering Emirati writers were educated in foreign countries and born before 1980. For example, Mohammad Al-Murr, an alumnus of an American university, is the perhaps most well-known short story writer in the UAE. His Arabic short stories, which have now been translated into English, describe the daily life of UAE people (Al-Murr, 1990, 1998). Even so, the historical background he portrays is that of the 20th century, rather than contemporary 21st Century life in the UAE. Zabya Khamis, who received a doctoral degree from a UK university, also provides impressions of UAE society in short stories in English (Khamis, 2005). Although her works illustrate Emirati society, her insights are shaped also by her education in Western countries. As the first local tertiary education institutions were established from 1976, Emirati nationals began to write stories in Arabic. Their works have been translated into English, as may be seen in Arab literature magazines such as "Banipal"; however, the perspectives of these writers born in the 1960s and 1970s do not necessarily reflect young Emirati voices of the 21st Century.

There are several English biographies and autobiographies written by Emiratis, often with the assistance of a collaborator or ghostwriter. These sometimes appear in anthologies such as the volume: *Global Emirates: An anthology of tolerance and enterprise* (Gupte & Aleghfeli, 2009). However these tend to focus on eminent people such as wealthy lawyers, business executives, or prominent members of the ruling family rather than more ordinary Emirati citizens.

In contrast, Japan has accumulated a great number of literary works written in Japanese over the centuries and nowadays books written by young Japanese authors are often translated into English. Yet, what English speakers have access to is mainly the writing of famous Japanese authors; and very little writing has been undertaken in English by so many young Japanese authors over a short period of time in the way encouraged by the Extremely Short Story Competition.

Extremely Short Story anthologies as a research resource

The Extremely Short Story genre as studied here was initially intended to enhance English learners' creative writing ability and motivation. The content can be a fact or fiction and its writing style can be

poetry or prose (Hassall, 2006). This supports any individual, including both elementary and advanced users, in writing an expressive text in English, regardless of literary quality. In the UAE ESSC, these texts were subsequently proofread to allow them to be published commercially, put on display on walls and websites, and sometimes presented as 'international travelling exhibitions' at universities and art galleries in various countries (e.g. www.zu.ac.ae/facets). The proofreading process, carried out by academics who were generally involved in teaching and correcting students' academic English, was designed to retain the student-authors' meanings and hence the themes of the text. Extremely Short Story writers are not professional authors or academics, but represent a large number of students at high schools, colleges and universities, enabling analysis of collections of these Extremely Short Stories to identify general trends about the participants' lifestyles and the themes of interest to them.

In addition to this proofreading to ensure comprehensibility for publication, other factors which make Extremely Short Stories different from other written sources are the incentives offered to potential student-authors, along with the anonymity which they are promised (Hassall, 2006, 2008). In both the UAE and Japan, stories were submitted online to the Extremely Short Story Competition, authors were given incentives in the form of worthwhile prizes to be awarded by respected organizations; they could expect the likelihood of their stories being given public exposure expecting quite a wide readership; and they were encouraged to use only part of their real name to provide authorship, or use a pseudonym to retain anonymity in public. Hence the ESSC provided a strong stimulus for them to express in writing what they wished to convey to others. As Hassall (2006) explained, the confidentiality of the ESSC enables writers to disclose delicate matters and touch on subjects bordering on the taboo because of this potential anonymity; it also allows high status student-authors, perhaps from more important families, to contribute on a level playing field and discuss ordinary themes of interest to themselves without worrying about their identity being disclosed either to the general public or perhaps to their guardians (often fathers or older brothers) who might be over-sensitive about such disclosure. In both the UAE and Japan, sponsors of the ESSC from the local business community offered prizes to those stories deemed most interesting or imaginative by a team of judges, and this helped motivate the creative enthusiasm of the writers. Thanks to distinctive benefits such as these, an ESSC can collect sufficient numbers of stories to make compilation of anthologies possible and provide an interesting read for those interested in finding out what such student-authors think in different countries.

ESSC writers

The linguistic backgrounds of Emirati student-writers of *Pearls* and Japanese student-writers of *Sun* may be compared. In the UAE, children start learning English in the first year of elementary school, and private kindergartens usually offer English lessons (Matsubara, 2011: p.104). Additionally, there is a great likelihood of Emirati children encountering in their daily life people of other nationalities speaking English as a lingua franca, because such individuals form a large proportion of the UAE population. Therefore UAE children will often understand English better than Japanese children who start learning English at the age of 10, and who are less likely to meet people using English socially. In both the UAE and Japan the proportion of students entering tertiary education institutions from high school is similar although the sizes of the national populations are very different – the total population of Emirati nationals in the UAE is 1.4 million while that of Japan is 127 million (World Bank, 2014). According to the UAE Yearbook (2013), 80% of male students and 95% of female students leaving high school entered tertiary education in that year (p. 178). This appears similar to Japan, where the total percentage of male and female students leaving high school and entering tertiary education was 80% in 2014 (Cabinet Office, 2015).

Fig. 1 *Pearls of Emirati Wisdom*

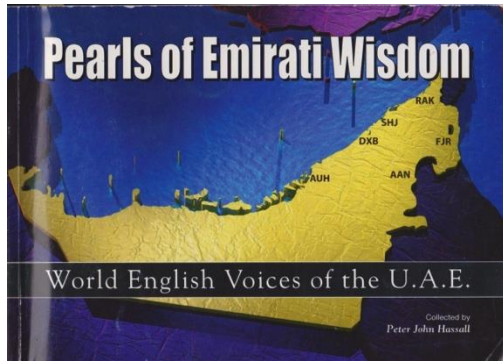
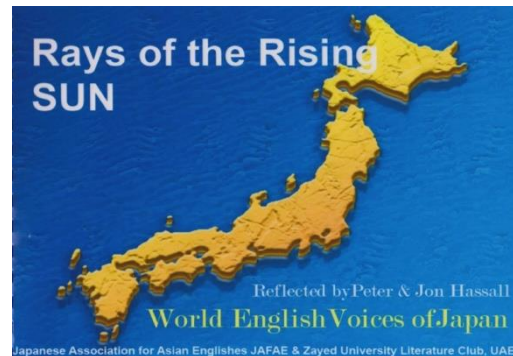


Fig. 2 *Rays of the Rising Sun*



The *Pearls* and *Sun* anthologies shared similar contexts as follows:

- Stories in both ESSC anthologies were collected nationwide in 2006.
- The writers of *Pearls* were Emirati nationals; they were all students at government universities or colleges and were aged 17-23. The writers of *Sun* were Japanese nationals; they were junior high school students to adults with 96% of the stories (494 stories out of 513) written by authors aged 13-24.
- The ratio of male to female writers in each anthology was approximately 40% to 60%.
- The total number of student-authors in each group was approximately 500, although some writers in *Pearls* posted more than two stories: there were 963 stories in the *Pearls* anthology, and 513 stories in the *Sun* anthology.
- There was no restriction on the content and titles by the competition or by the anthology compilers.

Analysis

Every story in *Pearls* and *Sun* was initially categorized according to theme. This theme represented a digest of what the writer's apparent intention. Themes included tangible objects such as 'my friend' or 'the cat', and abstract concepts such as 'encouragement' and 'loneliness'.

Some stories were considered to contain more than one theme. For example,

Thank you for...

My parents taught me how to love. I thank them. I'm happy now. I hit lots of snags. At that time I was helped by friends. I thank them. I'm happy now. You're here now, so I'm here now. Thank you. I'm happy now. I hope everyone's happiness lasts forever!! (*Sun* #397)

In the story above, three themes were identified, namely: 'family', 'friends and friendship' and 'gratitude and satisfaction'.

The first procedure of the research extracted frequent and unique themes in Emirati and Japanese text. The next procedure was to search for evidence of the general mindsets, behaviors, preferences, values and dominant culture of writers in the two countries. This process will help clarify comparison between the everyday life and society of young citizens in the two countries. Although text in the ESSC refer to both factual and fictional events, this distinction is largely irrelevant to this study, which deals with the themes of text that reflect the writers' interests.

Limitations of the ESSC

Although both *Pearls* and *Sun* contain a considerable number of text created by people in their teens and twenties, clearly these two ESSC anthologies cannot represent the voices of all young people in the two countries. Young people who did not attend higher educational institutions or high schools were excluded. Similarly, the population of student-authors under consideration was confined to individuals who became aware of the ESSCs and who submitted their stories to the competition.

When considering the contents of the stories, we need to consider freedoms of expression in each country. Article 21 of the Japanese Constitution assures ‘freedom of speech and expression’ (Japan Institute of Constitutional Law, 1946); however, the Worldwide Press Freedom Index gives the world press freedom ranking of Japan as 65th in 2006 (Reporters Without Borders), the year the stories of *Sun* were written. On the other hand, Article 30 of the UAE constitution states that there is ‘partial’ freedom of opinion and expression (UAE Government, 1996), and the world press freedom ranking of UAE was 77th in 2006. Therefore, the self-expression of both Japanese and Emirati people is shaped by social pressures even if the ESSC assures the anonymity of the writers through the implementation of nicknames.

Overall themes

The ten most frequently-appearing themes in each anthology are shown in **Table 1** in descending order of frequency.

Table 1: The ten most frequently appearing themes in each anthology.

Rank	<i>Pearls</i> (UAE)	N	% of text	Rank	<i>Sun</i> (Japan)	N	% of text
1	Death	79	8.2	1	Hobbies & club activities	79	15.4
2	Moral message	78	8.1	2	Friends & friendship	57	11.1
3	Self-expression	63	6.5	3	Appreciation of nature	47	9.2
4	Family	55	5.7	4	Moral message	43	8.4
5	Travel, leisure & events	47	4.9	5	Sports	36	7.0
6	Friends & friendship	45	4.7	5	Future dreams & ambitions	36	7.0
7	Daily Life	40	4.2	7	Romantic feelings	27	5.3
8	Pets & living creatures	30	3.1	8	Gratitude & satisfaction	24	4.7
9	Appreciation of nature	26	2.7	9	Self-expression	22	4.3
10	Traffic accidents	25	2.6	10	Music	20	3.9

The discussion follows will focus on:

- A. Themes distinctive to *Pearls* (UAE)
- B. Themes shared by *Pearls* (UAE) and *Sun* (Japan)

- C. Other common frequently-appearing themes
- D. Themes distinctive to *Sun* (Japan)
- E. Themes not frequently appearing but significant to the UAE
- F. Themes not frequently appearing but significant to Japan

Themes distinctive to *Pearls* (UAE)

'Death' (Rank: 1) and 'Traffic accidents' (Rank: 10)

The theme of 'Death' was ranked most frequent in *Pearls* with a count of 79 stories, while *Sun* had only five stories related to 'Death'. The theme of 'Death' includes death in traffic accidents, as well as more natural death including death of family members. In *Pearls* the theme of 'Traffic accidents' ranked tenth with a count of twenty-five stories, while *Sun* had only one story on this theme. Most of the stories related to 'Traffic accidents' include also the theme of 'Death'. Emirates 24/7, an English-language national newspaper in the UAE (2012), reported that the UAE has one of the world's highest traffic accident rates relative to its population. This number has been decreasing lately, but the traffic accident rate remains considerably higher in the UAE than in Japan. In 2007, the year *Pearls* and *Sun* were compiled, the number of fatalities resulting from traffic accidents was 1,056 in the UAE and 5,744 in Japan (E-stat, 2015). Considering the total population of Japan is 14 times larger than the UAE (World Bank, 2014), it is easy to understand that Emirati people are more likely to witness such incidents on the roads.

In Japan, the number of fatal traffic accidents was highest in the late 1960's and at the beginning of the 1970's, coinciding with a period of high growth of the Japanese economy. At that time, Japan was in the midst of economic development, its population was expanding and improvements in infrastructure, including the construction of necessary roads, was unable to catch up with this progress for some time. It may be that at the time the ESSC stories were collected, the UAE was in a similar period of transition to becoming a mature society, mirroring the path to progress which Japan followed.

The following UAE story is dreadfully realistic:

Bloody Ending: Three teenagers picked a car and drove it insanely. Causing disruption in traffic through speeding was their dearest hobby. However, they all met their end, when they collided with a huge truck. Fresh blood spilled in the streets, a corpse was hanging out of the window. No one was alive. (*Pearls* #175)

'Family' (Rank: 4)

The birth rate of the UAE was in the past considerably higher than in recent years: Green & Smith (2007) reported that in Al Ain, the fourth most populated city in the UAE, the range for the number of babies a woman delivered was 1-18 for the grandmothers' generation, 2-16 for the mothers' generation, and 1-6 for the daughters' generation (p. 269). It seems the birth rate is clearly decreasing but remains high compared to that of Japan. The Japanese birth rate in the 1960s was 1.6-2.2 and it has been on the decline ever since (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2015). Emirati people have families much larger than in Japan, and hence have more probability to face the death of family members. In *Pearls*, family members were not only depicted in the theme of 'Death', but they also appeared repeatedly in stories of 'Travel, leisure and events'.

Table 2. Number of stories in which family members were the central theme

	Whole Family	Fathers	Mothers	Sisters &/or Brothers	Grandmothers &/or Grandfathers	Other Relatives	Babies
UAE	22	21	49	15	11	14	10
Japan	4	6	7	5	3	0	0

Table 2 shows the number of stories dealing with family members. This data supports the idea that young Emirati people were more likely to interact with and perhaps care for family members, including distant relatives, than young Japanese people did. In other words, the UAE seems to be more oriented to (extended) family (this fits with Islamic teaching, which stresses the importance of the family). The Japanese text, in contrast, do not often mention family members: for Japanese youth, friends seem to be the major focus. The result of an opinion survey on youth conducted by the Cabinet Office in 2001 supports this impression: when asked “Who do you spend time with on holiday?”, most elementary school pupils answered “family”, while more than 60% of secondary school students answered “friends”.

Another interesting feature of the family-related stories in *Pearls* is that they throw light on the family structure of UAE society. Consider the following:

1996, a beautiful year: Thinking about my beautiful days in 1996. The day my mother had the baby. My family and I were happy. I felt a change in life. Afterwards, we went to Saudi and my sister finished school. Then, my father got a new house in Sharjah and my brother got married. (*Pearls* #5)

Note that in just one year, the writer’s mother gave birth to a baby, his/her brother got married and his/her sister graduated, presumably from high school or a university. This story exemplifies a family structure which would be very unusual in Japan. At one time in the UAE, women used to marry in their teens, and give birth for twenty years or more; it is not surprising then, that an Emirati mother might deliver a baby at the same time that her older child gets married.

‘Travel, leisure and events’ (Rank: 5)

This theme included picnics, driving, parties and whatever the writers did in their leisure time.

Eid [Islamic] Holiday: Last Eid, I went to Oman by car with friends. We camped on the beach and went fishing and swimming. We also played volleyball and football. We cooked fish and chicken with rice and drank orange juice. Afterwards, I went into the desert because my brother’s car had broken down. (*Pearls* #227)

For Emirati people, going out for a barbecue on the seashore or in the desert is a very typical and popular holiday activity. The story above was likely written by a male – in the UAE young or unmarried females typically do not go far unless a male family member accompanies them, in keeping with Islamic teaching that stipulates a woman should not travel alone without a male family member (Suleymaniye Foundation, 2009).

In *Sun* this theme was ranked 11th with a count of 19 stories. Six of them talked about events related to Christmas, which no Emirati wrote about.

‘Daily life’ (Rank: 7)

More than 90 percent of the stories categorized as about ‘Daily life’ written by Emirati student-authors expose writers’ trivial or comical mistakes in everyday life; for example:

Action movie: Yesterday I went to the cinema to see an action film about motor-racing. In the cinema I felt like the driver of the car. Afterwards, I went to my car and drove very fast. The police saw me. They caught me and took my car. I am a crazy driver. (*Pearls* #105)

An improper impression: I was late on the first day of semester. The parking lot was full. I parked my car in a messy way. Later that day, I was asked to remove it because I was blocking another car. I found out the car I had blocked belonged to my new professor. (*Pearls* #127)

Themes shared by *Pearls* and *Sun*

‘Moral message’ (Rank: 2 in *Pearls*, 4 in *Sun*)

This theme appeared as the most frequent shared theme in the UAE and Japan anthologies: ranking second most frequent in the UAE and fourth most frequent in Japan. However, to the present analyst the tone of Emirati stories on this theme appeared rather insistent and cynical; in contrast, Japanese stories seemed to be more innocent, encouraging and heartening.

The following, rather fatalistic story characterizes an outlook on life evidenced in many of the *Pearls* text:

Never think you are the best: Life, like the earth, turns around. Everybody and everything has a beginning and an ending. If you control the world, do not hurt the people. You should understand even if you reach space, there is somebody bigger than you. Death takes the biggest person on the earth in one second. (*Pearls* #576)

In contrast, the following optimistic story illustrates an outlook on life dominant in the Japanese text:

It says to me: Dreams are wonderful. Dreams give me motivation. When times are hard, I can walk into the future. Do you have a dream? To have a dream is very easy! You find your favorite thing. And you mustn’t forget your dream. You must try to make your dream come true. Fight! (*Sun* #152)

‘Self-expression’ (Rank: 3 in *Pearls*, 9 in *Sun*)

‘Self-expression’ was another popular theme in both anthologies. In both, some writers introduced themselves quite simply by outlining which school they belonged to, what they liked and what they did regularly. Other writers appeared to search for personal identity, often indicating a feeling of vague uncertainty for the future. The tone of this writing was similar in both countries: it may be universal that young people around this age are struggling to discover their own identity. The following story from Japan provides a clear example of self-questioning:

Who am I?: Who am I? Where do I come from? Who am I? What do I want to do? Who am I? What am I doing? Who am I? Why do I exist? Who am I? What does ‘I exist’ mean? Who am I? What will happen to me? Who am I? (*Sun* #490)

‘Friends and friendship’ (Rank: 6 in *Pearls*, 2 in *Sun*)

‘Friends and friendship’ was a very popular theme in both the UAE and Japan anthologies. It would appear that ‘Friends and friendships’ was one of the main concerns of these young student-authors

regardless of their nationality. Many stories explained the importance of friendship, as illustrated by the following:

Friendship: The greatest thing for me is friendship. Friendship is a special kind of love, it just grows between good friends. A best friend is someone who understands silence as well as words. I believe that nothing on earth is as great as friendship, no jewel; no pearl shares its worth. (*Pearls* #273)

My friends: I have many friends. We spend every day together. A cheerful girl, an interesting girl, a tender girl. But all are my important friends. When I am sad, when I want to cry, when I am troubled, who I want to be with are my irreplaceable friends! I am smiling because I have friends. (*Sun* #251)

‘Appreciation of nature’ (Rank: 9 in Pearls, 2 in Sun)

This theme was ranked third most frequent in Japan and ninth most frequent in the UAE. Although both Emirati and Japanese student-authors wrote about the same theme, stories from each country had their own distinctive flavor.

In the UAE, a total of twenty-two writers portrayed the desert in a positive way and the word ‘camel’ appeared in ten stories. Frequent usage of words related to the desert indicated that Emirati people are proud of their distinctive creatures and desert landscapes.

Attraction: Her bronzed and yellow silky sands; Her black and gray stone; Her white and blue skies; Her shiny golden sun; Her high colorful buildings; Her calm refreshing air; Her nice and beautiful smells; Her green parks and streets; Her pellucid fresh water; all these attract me to my lovely country. (*Pearls* #139)

Two writers expressed their surprise and joy when they saw snowfall in the northern Emirates for the first time. This had occurred in 2004, at the time of the first officially recorded snowfall in the UAE. Even rainfall made five Emirati writers joyfully happy – perhaps hard to understand for Japanese people who live on an island of high precipitation. The following story conveys how lucky the UAE writer felt when it rained, interestingly juxtaposed with the attitude of visitors from a rainier country:

You bring your luck: It rained in Abu Dhabi, as if to replenish all those dry years. Ayesha excitedly rushed out, soaking her 1000 dirham gown, to pray in the rain which brought luck. The Browns rushed back into the airport, disappointingly thinking, ‘couldn’t help but bring our weather along, how unlucky are we?’ (*Pearls* #950)

In Japan, 15 out of 47 stories referred to the beauty of the seasons and transitions between the seasons, and eleven stories referred to weather. Mirroring Emirati writers’ pride in their desert landscape, Japanese text suggested that Japan is blessed with verdant nature. Interestingly, many writers showed how weather conditions and other natural phenomena altered their mood, and particular weather conditions might remind them of past events:

Rainy Day: I do not want to go out on a rainy day. Someone’s sorrow is always there. It was a rainy day when I last saw her. It was a rainy day when I parted in anger with him. I do not want a rainy day. It has begun to rain. (*Sun* #327)

Other common frequently appearing themes

Two more themes were ranked high on the theme list of both ESSC anthologies, namely: ‘Pets and living creatures’ and ‘Future dreams and ambitions’. Young people in both countries appeared to feel affection towards living creatures such as dogs, cats and birds. They also wrote about their future dreams and ambitions as might be expressed by young people anywhere.

Themes distinctive to *Sun* (Japan)

'Hobbies and club activities' (Rank: 1)

'Hobbies and club activities' was ranked the most frequent in *Sun*, with 79 stories, while it ranked 22nd most frequent in *Pearls* (16 stories). It seems that these young Japanese people often had specific hobbies and put great value on them. One significant difference between the two anthologies was that the Japanese writers referred to a far greater variety of hobbies. Japanese young people named many kinds of hobbies; whereas, young Emirati people named only a few different kinds.

Sport was the most popular hobby for young Japanese people. They referred to eleven different kinds of sports in thirty-six stories, specifically football (13), baseball (11), basketball (4), dance (3), running (3), kendo (japanese sword-fighting) (2), cycling (1), beach volleyball (1), lacrosse (1), classic ballet (1) and tennis (1).

In contrast, the Emirati writers referred to mere four kinds of sports in sixteen stories, specifically football (13), swimming (1), hunting (1) and car racing (1). One possible reason why there were few stories on sports in the UAE might be a result of the poor provision and low prestige value of Physical Education in educational establishments, particularly for females. Some Emirati parents do not seem to want their daughters to play sports seriously, because they feel this may affect their daughters' marriage prospects (Matsubara, 2014: p.229). Parents fear that sports might make 'tomboys' out of their daughters, which would be a negative factor in their daughter finding a suitable marriage partner (Ghanem, 2001: p. 307); parents also worry that their daughters may get injured and scarred, marring their beauty. In my personal experience as a karate instructor at a UAE university, at least 4 out of 50 female students kept it secret from their parents that they were learning karate. In contrast, the following story from Japan describes a young female happily participating in a dance performance at a Physical Education festival, something which seems unlikely to be encouraged by the guardian of an Emirati girl in the UAE:

Dance: I joined a dance club nine month ago. I couldn't dance when I started. My first performance was at a PE festival, we danced 'Girls'. Then I became interested in another genre; 'Lock'. I danced 'Lock' last month in my school festival. I was happy to dance with my club mates. (*Sun* #64)

'Romantic feelings' (Rank: 7)

'Romantic feelings' was ranked seventh most frequent in *Sun*, with 27 stories; however this was not a popular theme in *Pearls*. Romantic stories from the Japanese young people indicated a lot of variety: some expressed happiness to have sweethearts, some introduced their idols, some confessed sorrowful heartbreak and so on. In contrast, no Emiratis wrote about any boyfriends or girlfriends. In the UAE, boys and girls are clearly segregated from the point they enter elementary school until they marry, and generally they are not allowed (publicly) to have boyfriends or girlfriends. This restriction especially applies to girls, linked to the Islamic teaching that 'the best thing for a woman is not to see men and not to be seen by men' (Kinga, 1995: p. 319). This idea may be also derived from a traditional belief that puts a high value on women's virginity (Cohen-Mor, 2005; Khan, 1994). Many Emirati adults would try to prevent young men and women from meeting each other and even if a young single man and woman were in love, they could not make it public unless they became engaged (Matsubara, 2014: p184).

The following Japanese story is one an Emirati would be most unlikely to post:

My dear: If I was asked ‘which do you choose your close friends or your boyfriend?’ Of course I would answer, ‘my boyfriend’. Maybe some might think of me as cruel. However, there is a clear reason to choose my boyfriend. I have close friends who understand all of me. (*Sun* #219)

This does not of course mean that romantic feelings do not exist in the UAE; some Emirati girls confessed love for secret admirers, for example:

Last night: I looked into the sky last night. The moon was so white and the stars were shining so brightly. I was thinking about someone somewhere. I wished that he were here. So, my stars will tell him that when he feels all alone that someone somewhere is thinking of him. (*Pearls* #413)

‘Gratitude and satisfaction’ (Rank: 8)

‘Gratitude and satisfaction’ was ranked eighth most frequent in *Sun* with 24 stories but ranked 35th with ten stories in *Pearls*. Expression of gratitude and satisfaction by Japanese was generally directed to people who were close to the writers, namely parents and friends, but it was also sometimes directed towards the social environment. An example of this, signifying that society is safe and resilient, is shown in the following story:

Happiness: We have more happiness than most people because we can eat food every day. We can come home to our houses. We have clothes. We have family cars. We can receive education. We can play soccer. We can go to the amusement park. So we should feel happier in our lives. (*Sun* #118)

Four of the ten stories on this theme in the UAE anthology express gratitude and satisfaction toward God, which no Japanese writer mentioned.

‘Music’ (Rank: 10)

‘Music’ had twenty stories in *Sun* but only three stories in *Pearls*. The UAE’s paucity of ‘Music’ stories is consonant with its educational policy: during UAE mandatory education, students have music classes only for the first two to five years. Emirati adults tend to think that music is disruptive to Islamic faith and respectability, because music is thought to hamper concentration on prayer (Matsubara, 2014: p.225). This attitude tended to make the Emirati writers shy away from music. My personal experience at a university illustrates this social aspect. There was a music club and about 10-20 female students enjoyed playing instruments there, but at least three girls hid from their parents that they participated in the club and played instruments. Japanese writers, on the other hand, were keen to stress the importance of music. They referenced a wide variety of favorite music styles including pop music, rock ‘n’ roll, classical music, jazz, opera, punk, heavy metal and reggae. Several Japanese writers referred to their playing the guitar, violin or oboe, or performing vocal percussion. Others described their music club activities. The following story illustrates a common expressed attitude to music:

Music: I think music has very important meanings. When I feel down, I listen to my music. Then I am borne up by my favorite music. Music has deep meanings. Song writers have various particular opinions and convey them through music. So we sometimes cry when we listen to our music. (*Sun* #209)

Lower frequency themes distinctive to the UAE anthology

a) ‘Religion and God’ (Rank: 11 in *Pearls*)

‘Religion and God’ was ranked 11th in *Pearls*, with 22 UAE stories referring to this theme; no Japanese author used this theme. In the context of the UAE anthology, the term ‘religion’ could be replaced by

the word 'Islam' and 'God' by 'Allah'. Emirati writers expressed their immense respect for God, and also described annual events in the Islamic calendar. This indicates that Islam and God were closely connected to the everyday life of these Emiratis.

Ali, Lost and Found: Ali was a brilliant student. Everybody liked him. One of his mean friends decided to transform him into a bad guy. He started drinking alcohol. One day, he saw a mosque and clearly heard the Holy Quran. He felt the beginning of a new life and people who respected him. (*Pearls* #116)

'Ruling family' (Rank: 17 in Pearls)

In the UAE anthology 'Ruling family' was ranked the 17th most frequent theme, having nineteen stories. In contrast, no discussion of the royal family or of politicians was included by any of the Japanese student-authors. These 19 Emirati stories all expressed love and respect for the UAE ruling family, with sixteen focused on the late Sheikh Zayed, the 'Founder of the UAE', who passed away in 2004. The ESSC which gathered stories for *Pearls* was held in 2006, yet two years after his passing there were still as many as sixteen elegies for the Emiratis' beloved Sheikh Zayed. An illustrative example on the theme of the late president now follows:

Zayed: He was our Father, our President. He was part of our life, the most important part. Suddenly we lost him on the night of 02/11/04. It was the saddest night for us. We promise you our Father we will do our best to achieve your dreams and develop our country. (*Pearls* #962)

In nine stories out of sixteen, the writers called the late president 'father', and deeply grieved his death. Three stories expressed appreciation of his unprecedented leadership, and two stories that he promoted the empowerment of women.

'War' (Rank: 20 in Pearls)

'War' was ranked the 20th most frequent in the UAE, with seventeen stories being related to 'war'. Some of these described the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and wars in Iraq by appealing to the tragedy of war. At that time, UAE newspapers frequently featured political crises and wars in the Middle East. One powerful 50-word piece about 'war', written by an Emirati student is as follows:

On the battleground: Bullets spread out everywhere. Bombs fall from skies like fireballs. Fresh blood splatters on the streets. Painful screams of innocent people fill the horizons. A soldier kills, a soldier dies. Armored tanks launch blasts of malevolent fire. Lifeless bodies scatter. The depravity of humanity is cruelty in its full monstrosity. (*Pearls* #600)

The region around Japan, on the other hand, has not seen a war for some years, and the Japanese authors seemed not to focus on this theme. Three stories in *Sun* talked about war, in the context of antiwar/antinuclear sentiments and aspirations for world peace.

'Marriage' (Rank: 28 in Pearls)

'Marriage' was ranked 28th in the UAE anthology, with fifteen stories being written about 'marriage'; in contrast, only three stories about marriage were submitted to the ESSC in Japan. Several of the UAE stories referred to social problems relating to marriage customs such as polygamy. Islam allows men to marry up to four wives, as long as they are all treated equally. However, it seems there was a regulation in the UAE stipulating that an engaged couple should discuss whether the bride would accept her groom's future polygamy or not. Thus, in the UAE, problems arose related to prospective or existing

polygamy and some Emirati student-authors showed they were keen to write about this theme, though transplanted into an unlikely Western context:

Betrayal story: In 1990, a man named Jake loved Maria. After five months they married. He went away on business. One day he betrayed Maria. When he traveled to Oman, he took a second wife, then returned to UAE. She got angry because she loved Jake. She does not love him now. (*Pearls* #168)

‘Maids and nannies’ (Count: 5 in Pearls)

In the UAE anthology, five stories mentioned ‘Maids and nannies’, whereas there are no stories about this theme in *Sun* (Japanese families seldom hire domestic help). Out of these five Emirati stories, four described important roles played by maids and nannies in Emirati families. The following Emirati story indicates the importance of ‘maids and nannies’ in the writer’s household:

My problem: I stood for 10 minutes thinking how I would cook the chicken. Suddenly the phone rang and I answered it. It was my grandmother. I told her that I was preparing the lunch. She sent her housemaid to help me. I was very happy because she had solved my problem. (*Pearls* #554)

Lower frequency themes distinctive to the Japan anthology

a) ‘Hometown’ (Count: 1 in Pearls, 11 in Sun)

In the Japanese anthology, eleven stories looked back nostalgically to the writer’s hometown, while only one Emirati mentioned a hometown. In Japan, many university students lived far away from the home where they were born and where their families dwelt in order to attend university. It is true that some Emirati students lived in hostels or student dormitories; however, they could usually return home by car in an hour or two at most. The UAE extends over a relatively small territory with no need for long-distance high-speed trains (the habitable area in the UAE is within a circle whose diameter represents just a five-hour drive). Japan, on the other hand, extends over a much larger territory; from the subarctic to the subtropical. A typical ‘hometown’ story from *Sun* is as follows:

Coming Home: Getting off the train, I feel I’ve got back to my home town. Sounds, air, sky, mountains, smells, people, everything here relaxes me. Time passes so slowly here it’s like the breeze. My body tells me that here is my origin. My parents are waiting for me in my home. (*Sun* #58)

Some Japanese stories reminisced about attractive features of their hometowns, including traditional regional food, distinctive festivals and varied landscapes. These features contributed to distinctive local coloring in Japan of which people were deservedly proud, and about which they were keen to write.

‘Job-hunting’ (Count: 1 in Sun)

One Japanese university student mentioned ‘job-hunting’; no Emirati student-authors made any reference to this theme. The following story may sound strange, or even incomprehensible to non-Japanese people, particularly Emiratis:

Recruitment suit: I hate my recruitment suit. It’s uncomfortable!! So I decided I wouldn’t wear it if I didn’t have any important job hunting to do. One day, I overslept. I wouldn’t need to choose clothes if I wore it. I wasn’t late to class. Now, I don’t hate my recruitment suit. (*Sun* #332)

There is no job-hunting season in the UAE, as there is in Japan, and young Emiratis normally simply start looking for work after they finish their education. When looking for work, Emiratis normally wear UAE

traditional attire characteristic of clothing worn habitually by Arabs in the Arabian Gulf. This consists of a long white robe called a 'kandora', with a colored headscarf or 'gutrah' for men; and for women a black coverall or 'abaya' and a black headscarf or 'shayla'. Thus, in contrast to job-hunting in a special 'recruitment suit', which is a plain dark blue or gray suit, as described in the Japanese ESSC story above, there is little likelihood of Emirati students writing about the clothes they would wear for a job interview as these are likely to be standard everyday attire and nothing 'out of the ordinary.'

Conclusion

A comparative analysis of themes in mini-text anthologies written in the first decade of the twenty-first century by young Emiratis and young Japanese reveals what the writers were most concerned about, what they were interested in, and how they spent their everyday lives. Results show that although politics, history and the dominant religions were very different in the two countries, at that time the generation of Emirati and Japanese students involved in writing ESSC stories showed a number of similarities: student-authors in both countries showed a preoccupation in searching for identity, and they regarded friendship to be of utmost importance. In addition, their writing demonstrates they often felt affection towards living creatures and that they clearly appreciated the beauty of nature.

To a Japanese reader, the most striking feature of the Emirati anthology was the number of stories about death. This could be attributed to the high rate of traffic accidents in the UAE, many of them involving fatalities, coupled with a larger family size leading to adolescents and young adults wishing to verbalize their awareness of the immediacy of death to their friends, acquaintances and loved-ones in a very close-knit society. Reading these text also provides evidence that Emirati students valued their family relationships as described in going out for family fun together. In addition, Emirati student-authors appeared to show great respect for Sheikh Zayed, the 'Founding Father of the UAE' and indicated that their lives were inseparably connected to Islam and God. In contrast, Japanese youth wrote about how they were keen to engage in hobbies and club activities, particularly those involving sports and music. In their stories, young Japanese people also indicated a tendency to enjoy involvement in adolescent romances, even though these might turn out to be 'bitter-sweet', and they also described their appreciation of their living environment.

This study suggests that such collections could provide a rich source of data for appreciating general tendencies of numerous student-authors, attending high school, colleges and universities in their home countries. These insights become possible because the stories include description and exemplification of the student-authors' daily lives, their mindsets, including their preferences and social values, together with behaviors related to their culture with each story epitomizing the writer's inner voice. Knowledge based on scrutiny and comparison of similar collections could promote understanding between different cultures. Although the stories analyzed here were generated ten years ago, the themes discussed above continue to resonate in the present author's more recent observation of student life in the UAE; and comparison highlights ongoing social transitions in both countries.

In the future, it will be interesting to compare these results with themes of other ESSC anthologies produced under similar conditions by nationals of different countries. Currently, the Extremely Short Story Competition as initiated by Hassall has involved students of eleven countries including the six countries of the Gulf Council Countries (the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), as well as Yemen, Japan, South Korea, and Lithuania with the possibility of students from additional countries becoming involved. A selection of Extremely Short Stories produced in English in the UAE have been translated into a variety of languages including Arabic, Japanese, Greek, French, Italian, Chinese,

Indonesian and Burmese, with further translations in process. It would appear that there is the likelihood of further ESSC stories waiting to be written and studied in every corner of the world.

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