

## **Shimpei Takeuchi**

Art Education, Nara University of Education, Japan

E-mail: shimpei@nara-edu.ac.jp

# **Meaning of Japanese traditional-style drawing lessons in current school education**

## **Abstract.**

*In my view, educational practices related to saving traditional culture should be effective not only in preserving the culture but also in helping children learn. An examination of previous studies suggests that it is necessary to develop a new educational meaning for Japanese traditional culture. The aims of this study are, first, to identify the educational meaning of Japanese traditional drawing lessons in schools today and, second, to train future teachers in the method of teaching traditional drawing and to verify the effects of such training in a university class. Instructional trials were conducted in an elementary school and a university. The trials were related to a ringa lesson (Japanese traditional-style drawing instruction). Through the above trials, I identified the educational significance of these lessons, which appeared to raise schoolchildren's visual literacy in retrieving information. The study shows that it is effective to introduce Japanese traditional drawing instruction to future teachers and to use this teaching method as a unit in a university class.*

## **Keywords**

*Traditional culture, Ringa lesson (Japanese traditional-style drawing instruction), Elementary school, Teacher training,*

## **Introduction**

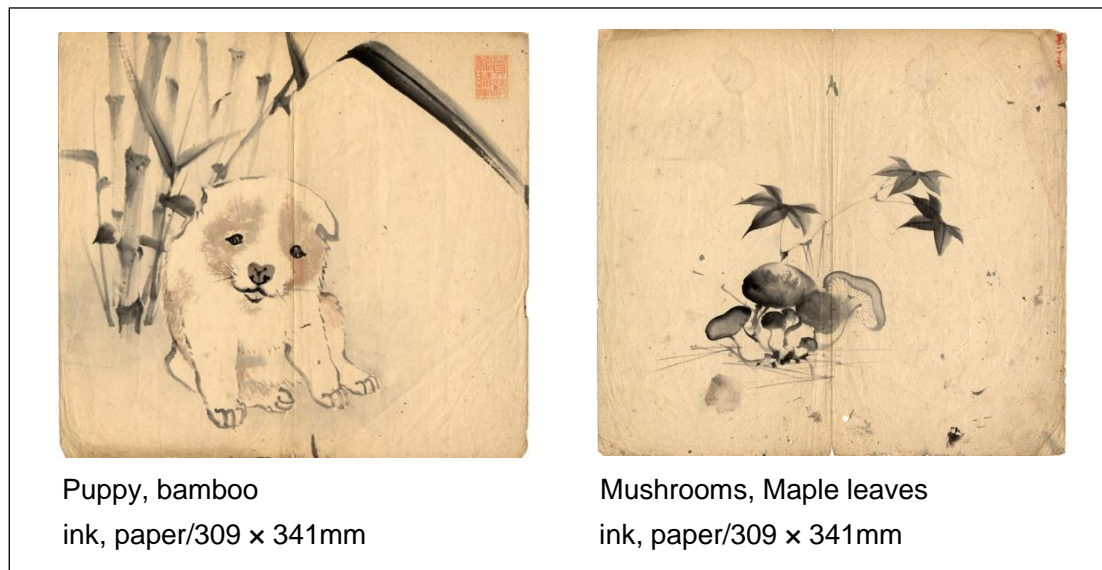
I believe that there is a problem wherein many traditional cultures need to be saved from decline and that this is likely a concern in many countries. In Japan, efforts are being made to teach schoolchildren the positive values of traditional culture and to spread this knowledge to the people. These efforts must be

effective to preserve the traditional culture but also to help children learn. Therefore, educators must actively look for educational significance in the practices of traditional cultures. In a previous study, Tereso (2012) focused on the educational meaning of traditional culture, pointing out the effects of *sado* (Japanese-style tea ceremony) or *sumi-e* (Japanese-style ink drawing) as a means of environmental education. Ruilun (2005) showed the influences from Chinese culture in art education in elementary and secondary schools. Hiltunen (2005) discussed the educational significance of a project that was related to the northern culture of Finland. Moreover, Chang (2010) indicated that she found ways of expanding students' cultural understanding, powers of observation, and critical thinking and problem-solving skills through utilising Taiwanese culture in art education. On the basis of these previous studies, I think it is important to develop a new educational meaning for Japanese traditional culture in art education. In particular, this study conducted educational trials, focusing on Japanese traditional-style drawing instructions.

Thus, the aims of this study are the following. First, to discover the educational significance in Japanese traditional drawing lessons in current elementary schools, with a particular focus on raising schoolchildren's visual literacy by retrieving information in an art class. Second, to train future teachers in the skills of teaching traditional styles of drawing, and to verify the effects of this teacher training in a university. In the next chapter, I will discuss the history and educational meaning of *ringa*.

### **History and educational meaning of *ringa***

*Ringa* is a Japanese traditional drawing instruction method in which sketching is done by imitating examples. *Ringa* instruction was frequently provided in the *Meiji* period (Kaneko, 1991). The tools are Japanese ink (*sumi*), Japanese paper (*washi*), water, Japanese brushes (*fude*) and examples of sketch (called a *rinpon*). It is a kind of *sumi-e*. In Japan, before the *Meiji* period, a method of drawing instruction based on students making sketches by imitating examples was widely adopted as a way of training professional painters. For example, in painting schools such as the *Maruyama* school or the *Kano* school during the *Edo* period, students were required to imitate a sketch for more than 10 years to become professional painters (Matuso, 1995, p.2). The *ringa* lesson was established before the *Meiji* period as one part of the curriculum for training professional painters in Japanese-style painting.



**Figure 1** *Rinpon* used in the *Meiji* period (19th century). *Mochizuki Gyokusen* (Japanese-style painter, 1834–1913)

In the *Meiji* period, the *ringa* lesson was incorporated into school education to train students in drawing skills (Figure 1 shows *rinpon* for a *ringa* lesson that were used in the *Meiji* period). There were also different types of *ringa* for which a pencil and a paintbrush was used, but the *ringa* lessons that were provided in school education in a variety of ways up until World War II eventually converged. However, the lesson of copying sketch was not employed after World War II (Ishikawa, 2005, p.20). In modern times, it was thought in the field of art education in Japan that the representation of individuality and creativity were important. For this reason, there has been a tendency for schoolteachers to shun the *ringa* lesson even today. Why was the educational importance of the *ringa* lesson forgotten by many teachers for several decades? I suggest that one reason is that the goal of conventional *ringa* lessons for children was only to help them 'learn the skill of copying example of sketch exactly'. However, I believe that there is greater educational significance in the *ringa* lesson other than developing children's skills. In particular, through the children's gaining information from a *rinpon*, there is an educational effect on learning wherein they implement expression for its own sake.

Regarding the educational meaning found in children's imitating each other's works of art, Eisner (1972, p.161) wrote, 'It is interesting to observe that copying, so long decried by educators, especially those in art education, can become in this setting a positive vehicle for facilitating learning'. Eisner's comment is important for considering the significance of learning based on copying or imitating (There is a difference between children's copying from each other and copying examples). Although a *ringa* lesson does not involve children making

their own original representations, I think that lessons related to the imitation of examples can promote their learning (Children can learn how to draw effectively from the information they perceive in the examples of sketch). Moreover, in the representation activity of the *ringa* lesson, I think there is significance in constantly repeating the reading of information and drawing.

The following five processes related to reading literacy are suggested in the framework for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) issued by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (OECD, 2006, p.49):

- retrieving information
- forming a broad general understanding
- developing on interpretation
- reflecting on and evaluating the content of a text
- reflecting on and evaluating the form of a text

In this list of key processes, 'retrieving information' is identified as the first process involved in reading literacy. I think the concept of 'retrieving information' is also related to gathering information from artworks as 'non-continuous texts' (OECD, 2006, p.47). In a *ringa* lesson, it is considered that children can obtain visual literacy skills by observing the *rinpon* analytically as an example for imitation. In other words, I would like to propose that the *ringa* lesson should have an emphasis on the development of visual literacy (not aiming of making an accurate copy of a form). Teachers in the past did not assume there could be educational meaning related to visual literacy in such lessons.

### **Schematic of this study**

As discussed in the introduction, the aims of this study wherein the *ringa* lesson is used, which are as follows:

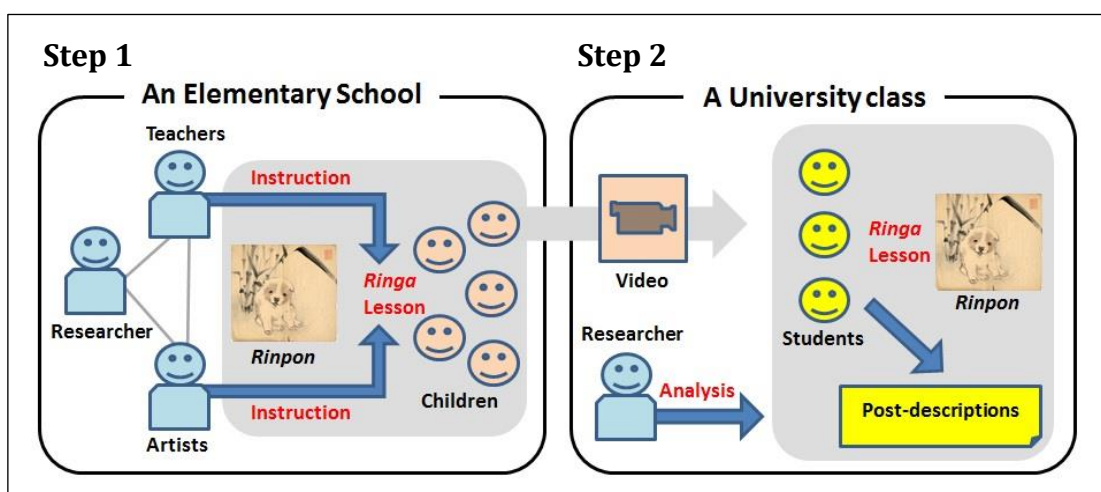
- to find the educational meaning of the *ringa* lesson in elementary schools today and
- to train future teachers in the method of presenting a *ringa* lesson and to verify the effects of this teacher training in a university setting.

On the basis of these aims, I set up two steps for the procedures of this study, at an elementary school and at a university.

In **Step 1**, the main goal is to identify educational meaning of the *ringa* lesson in elementary school today. In contrast to the *ringa* education of the *Meiji* period, I developed a lesson that would enhance the visual literacy of children through collaboration between elementary schoolteachers, artists, and researcher.

Specifically, I chose the subject of drawing animals and plants with Japanese ink and a paintbrush for third graders in an elementary school. I selected as teaching materials *rinpon* which were colour copies of artworks created in the *Meiji* period (Figure 1). I recorded this *ringa* lesson by video camera. The verbal instruction and images of the procedure used by the artists in presenting the lesson were recorded, and also children's utterances were recorded. By observing this lesson and video data, I sought to find a modern educational meaning in the *ringa* lesson.

In **Step 2**, I showed the video recorded in the above *ringa* lesson to students in a university fine arts education class to encourage them to consider the educational significance of Japanese traditional-style drawing instruction for school education today. After watching the video, the students received practical training in how to draw by using the *ringa* method to enhance their skills, just as the elementary school students recorded in the video. The measurement of the effect of this university class was conducted by analysing the students' artworks and post-descriptions. Through this procedure, I seek to clarify the modern educational meaning of the *ringa* lesson (not simply to repeat the same teaching methods used in the *Meiji* period). Figure 2 shows a schematic of this study.



**Figure 2** Schematic of this study

### Development of new meaning of *ringa* lesson

In this chapter, I explain in detail the two steps. **Step 1** is a practical lesson presented in an elementary school. **Step 2** is a practical lesson presented in a university fine arts teacher training course (The text of this chapter is based on a presentation given at the 34th World Congress of the International Society for Education through Art [InSEA 2014], in Melbourne, Australia, 7–11 July 2014).

## Step 1 – Trial *ringa* lesson in current elementary school art education

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has revised its Government Teaching Guidelines approximately once every 10 years since the end of World War II. The latest guidelines were announced by MEXT in 2008. In the descriptions of each subject, several revisions were made regarding Art and Handicraft in elementary schools. I focused on one of concept of these revisions: 'respect for traditional culture'. This concept aims cultivating in children a deeper understanding of the Japanese and other country's cultures. With regard to this concept, specific learning activities include appreciating historical Japanese works of fine art or discovering and enjoying 'traditional culture' in the form of household handicrafts or local architecture. Presumably, this aim is not limited to art appreciation, but also involves learning about traditional Japanese artistic techniques and incorporating such techniques into self-expression (Takeuchi, 2014).

In view of the goal of 'respect for tradition' which is included in the guidelines, I visited the fine arts class of an elementary school to give *ringa* lessons with the aim of developing new educational meaning for this practice, through collaboration between the schoolteachers and artists (Japanese-style painters), and myself as the researcher. In particular, I considered that it is possible for children to develop visual literacy through representation using traditional-style drawing. An outline of the lesson presented in an elementary school is given below.

- School: Kyoto municipal *Sakaidani* elementary school
- Period: May 2012–June 2012
- Grade: Third grade students (n = 33)
- Teachers: The third graders' homeroom teachers
- Guest teachers: Professional Japanese-style painters,  
Graduate students majoring in Japanese-style painting
- Subject matter title: 'Let's express vividly, using only black and white'.
- Process of lesson:
  1. Through retrieving information from *rinpon*, the children are challenged to imitate what they see with a Japanese brush and Japanese ink (total three hours).
  2. By watching a demonstration by guest teachers, the children learn how to represent what they see using a Japanese brush and Japanese ink, which they did not understand well in the previous lesson (total two hours).

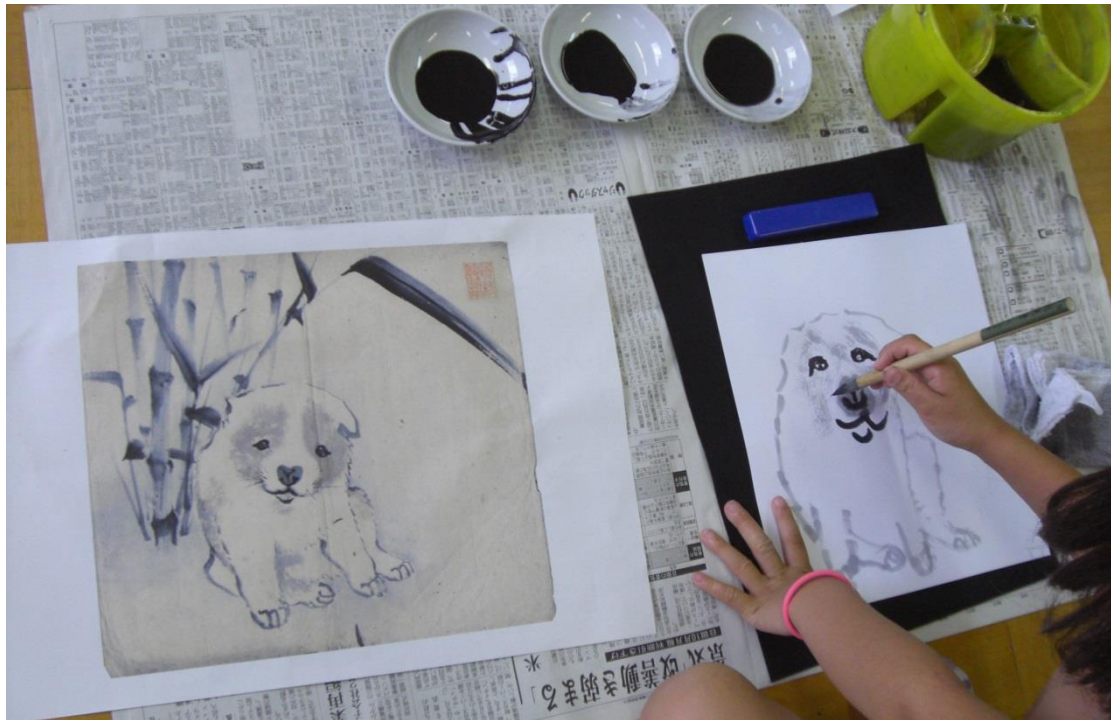
3. The children repeated the process of representation by retrieving information from a *rinpon* or an actual motif, remembering how to draw, which they had learned from a guest teacher (total two hours).

At the beginning of the *ringa* lesson, the children retrieved information from a *rinpon* on their own, and they imagined for themselves how to draw. However, they found it difficult to retrieve information from the unusual representation of a *rinpon* because, for example, the Japanese ink was blurred or was faint. Therefore, for the representation of information that the children could not retrieve on their own, we decided that the guest teachers would instruct the children on how to draw. Before the guest teachers came to the elementary school, the children wrote a letter about what they wanted to know about representation and it was sent to the guest teachers. In the next *ringa* lesson, the 11 guest teachers visited the elementary school and provided instruction and a demonstration of how to draw. We divided the total of 33 children into small groups. In each group, the guest teachers demonstrated to the children how to use Japanese ink and a Japanese paintbrush to imitate a *rinpon*. A guest teacher demonstrated how to represent a puppy and the children asked him or her how to make shading with Japanese ink (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** A guest teacher demonstrates how to draw and the children question her about the method for drawing a puppy (This photograph was taken from a video).





**Figure 4** A child tries to draw a puppy by imitating a rinpon, through recollecting the guest teacher's demonstration.

After receiving guidance from the guest teachers, the children were challenged to imitate a *rinpon* through their own efforts. They created images by imitating based on their recollection of the guest teacher's demonstration, which included skills such as adjusting the amount of Japanese ink or using brushstrokes (Figure 4). At the end of the lesson, the children were pursuing their own visual literacy by retrieving information and using the skill of imitating, through observing the *rinpon* or actual motifs.

I observed the lesson described above in real time and recorded it by video. Through observing the lesson and viewing the video after the lesson, I confirmed that there was educational significance for the following three points related to *ringa*:

- Through children's observation of the *rinpon*, there was a tendency for them to raise their level of visual literacy by retrieving information about how to draw from their observation.
- Many children interpreted the retrieved information about how to draw and utilized it for self-expression.
- The children tended to learn new skills by learning from the guest teachers how to retrieve information from the *rinpon* and how to represent what they saw by using the Japanese ink and the Japanese brush.



Therefore, in **Step 1**, I was able to identify educational meaning in three points related to the *ringa* lesson in current school education. Based on this educational meaning, in **Step 2**, I tried to practice lesson in a university to develop a teacher training on Japanese traditional-style drawing lessons. I will explain this teacher training in more detail in the next section.

### **Step 2 – Trial instruction for teaching the skills related to a *ringa* lesson in a university of fine arts teacher training course**

In this step, I aim to train future teachers in the method of teaching a *ringa* lesson and focus on ‘Advanced Studies in Art Education’, a university class taken by students majoring in art education at a teacher training university. To promote art education based on ‘respect for traditional culture’ which is a concept of the teaching guidelines of MEXT, I think it is necessary to incorporate traditional techniques as learning materials in university classes. An outline of the university class, which is the focus of this study is given below.

- University: Nara University of Education
- Class: Advanced Studies in Art Education
- Period: Nov. 2013 – Dec. 2013
- Grade: Third grade students (n = 9)
- Number of lessons: 90 min × 15
- Lesson Unit: ‘*Ringa*’ (90 min × 4)

In this section, I show that the effects of teacher training in traditional cultural practices were clarified through the two processes, as follows.

(1) Students watched a video of the *ringa* lesson and tried to draw (*ringa*).

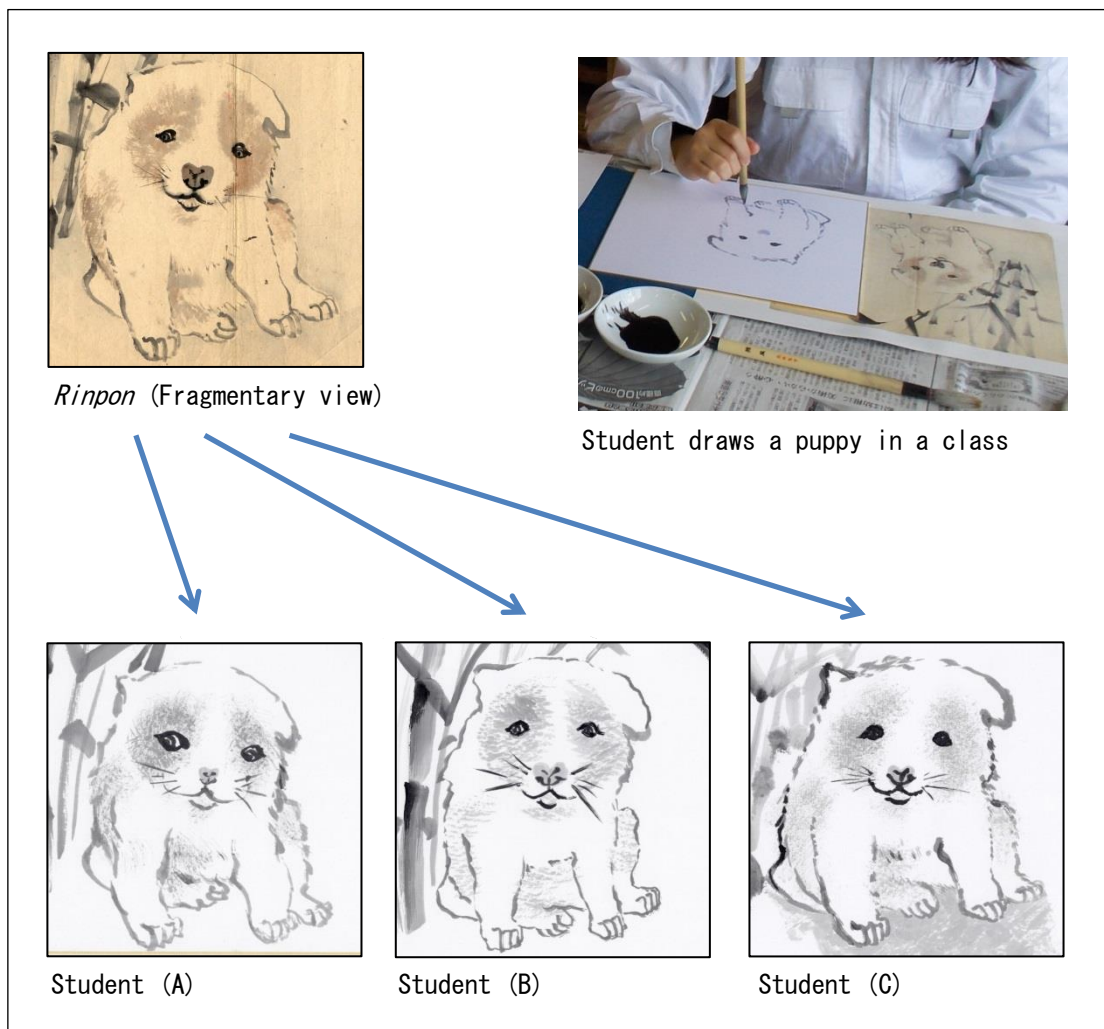
At the beginning of the lesson *Ringa* in the university class, the students watched a video of the schoolchildren in an art and handicraft class, which was a recording of the schoolchildren’s *ringa* lesson (explained in **Step 1**). The university students’ comments about the schoolchildren’s learning that they made after watching the video of the *ringa* lesson clarify their impressions and opinions about the effects related to the schoolchildren’s learning about traditional culture. I quote below specific comments made by the university students after they watched the video.

‘Using a Japanese traditional style of painting *ringa* in an art class has several benefits’.

‘Watching the traditional style of *ringa*, I felt it was important to “Show how to draw”’.

‘Since there was an example of sketch, I felt the learning goal would be exactly for children to understand’.

These comments indicate that the university students understood the educational meaning and importance of the *ringa* lesson, as shown in the video of the schoolchildren’s lesson. In the second half of the lesson, the university students drew by imitating the *rinpon* (puppy and bamboo). When the students practised *ringa*, they noticed that every student had originality in his or her representation. In particular, the puppy’s looks were different in each student’s work, although they had all used the same *rinpon* (Figure 5). They understood that the aim of the *ringa* lesson is not to make a replica of a *rinpon*; rather, the aim is to raise children’s level of originality and creativity in current school education.

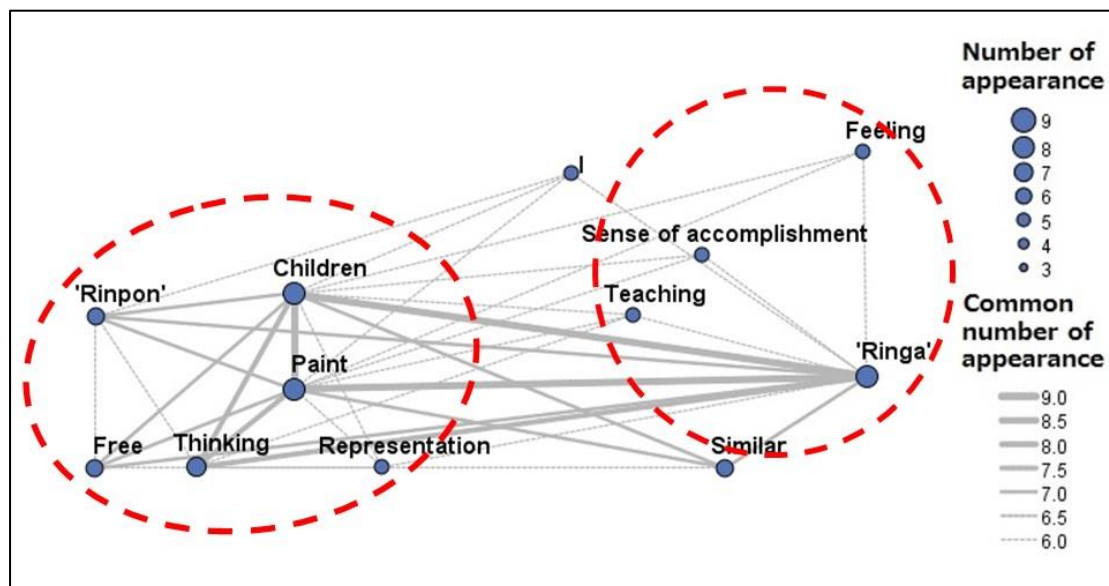


**Figure 5** Examples of artworks that demonstrate that the creativity and originality was different in each case (although students used the same *rinpon*).

(2) Students reflected on their own learning and considered the educational meaning of *ringa*

At the end of the lesson, the students reflected about their learning about *ringa* through writing post-descriptions. I analysed how the students felt as they watched the video and drew by imitating, based on their post-descriptions. Below, I will describe their responses with reference to the study by Takeuchi (2011, para.17) by analysing the post-description.

The students were asked simply to describe their thoughts about the lesson. Data was collected from nine students, and their comments contained a total of 6,442 words. As previously discussed, I entered the comments from the students' post-descriptions into a text file. The text files were analysed using text mining. IBM SPSS Text Analytics for Surveys 4.0 was employed as the text mining software due to its ability to handle Japanese natural language processing and the ease with which it performs analytical work on a text. However, note that the students' comments posed a problem of inconsistency and instability in terminological selection. Some expressions of the students were peculiar to the Japanese language. For these reasons, before the analysis was conducted, it was judged necessary to refine the language in the post-descriptions. In the three cases below, I unified words into the same category based on a rational judgment:



**Figure 6** Keywords map of students' post-descriptions. In this keyword map, when the blue circle that shows each word is large, the frequency of the word observed is high. Furthermore, when the line that connects the blue circles is thick, the frequency of a common co-occurring word is high. In addition, the position, direction and distance of each word do not express a specific meaning.

- two or more words with the same meaning
- differences produced by the students' clerical errors
- differences in notation in Chinese characters or notation in *Hiragana* characters

After this refinement, the text files were imported into the text mining software. Figure 6 shows the keywords map which was generated by the text mining software. Examining this keyword map, I found two trends regarding how the students thought about the educational effects of *ringa*. First, the students thought that representation based on a rinpon could provide a way for schoolchildren to learn through thinking and free representation (Underlined words appeared in the keyword map. In particular, see the inside of the red circle on the left). Second, they thought that schoolchildren can feel a sense of accomplishment through a ringa lesson (see inside of the red circle on the right).

## Conclusion

Through the two trials at the elementary school and the university, I could find an educational meaning for Japanese traditional-style painting instruction, and to verify the effect on teacher training. As discussed in the section on **Step 1**, the adoption of a *ringa* lesson for elementary school education today is significant in terms of increasing the visual literacy of schoolchildren. Although a *ringa* lesson is a classical teaching method, it might help children might develop the ability to collect information in their learning. However, a new meaning for the *ringa* lesson has not been frequently discussed in Japan. From the perspective of enhancing children's various types of literacy in art education, it is desirable that this kind of lesson should be widely discussed. In the section on **Step 2**, I discussed teacher training in a university as it is associated with a *ringa* lesson. I found that the university students recognized that a *ringa* lesson does not just involve the making of replicas. This conclusion is based on the analysis of their artworks and their comments. Furthermore, by reading the keyword map, I concluded that the students recognized several educational effects from a *ringa* lesson. In particular, I confirmed that the students thought that a *ringa* lesson can be a means of free representation for children and that it can bring children a sense of accomplishment through representation. The above discussion led me to conclude that it is effective to introduce Japanese traditional-style painting and this teaching method to future teachers as a unit in a university class.

Regarding the outlook for the future, I want to continue to develop teaching methods based on effective *ringa* lessons at each developmental stage, following up on the results of this research. Specifically, to encourage the development of

visual literacy in schoolchildren, I would like to create a curriculum that positions the *ringa* lesson in fine arts classes for 1st–6th grade in elementary school.

### **Acknowledgement**

I wish to express my appreciation to every person (the schoolchildren, the elementary school teachers, the guest teachers and the university students) who cooperated in and supported this study. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI, Grant Number JP23730847, JP26381203.

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