

Discover Poetry: Using Poetry in the ESL/EFL Classroom

Nina Guizar

*Instituto Mexicano Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales, A.C.
Mexico, City*

The use of poetry in the ESL/EFL classroom is a dual-purpose tool which provides both cultural enrichment and language skills improvement. This genre promotes vocabulary growth and linguistic maturity. Undoubtedly, poetry can embellish the learning environment. It has been observed that through poetry students can be motivated to acquire an appreciation of cultural values.

The teacher attempting to incorporate poetry in his/her lesson plan should have a working knowledge of poems, poets and background data of the life and times of the poet being studied. It is not being suggested that teachers become experts on iambic pentameter, but it is advisable that some homework be done. Go to your library. Look up anthologies. Thumb through easy reference volumes, such as encyclopedias. You will become enthralled with the discoveries you make. Soon you will develop a sense of what you wish to bring to the classroom. Your choice of material should be tempered by the level and background of your students. At any rate, your scenario should be kept light and delightful. Whereas T.S. Elliot might overly burden students, Robert Frost, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, or Edgar Allan Poe are quite accessible.

The time has come to release second language students from the bonds of neutral cultural concepts. Poetry adds color and

zest to the sometimes arid land of textbook English. What is wrong in adding feeling to the basic skills: speaking, listening, reading, writing, and _____? Let us not leave our students with the idea that English is an empty, vacuous, unemotional language. Let us not neglect to show them that there is warmth and beauty in the English language--that feelings can, indeed, be expressed in beautiful words and cadence. How better to do this than through poetry. That is what poetry is all about, isn't it? Communicating feelings.

Let imagination run free. There is no right or wrong answer here. Students should be made aware of the fact that nothing they say will count against them.

People have become so absorbed with gadgets and switches and keys that some have forgotten how to delve deep into themselves and be expressive, imaginative and individualistic.

Teachers often rob children of their imagination. They (we) penalize subjective thinking by constantly demanding objective answers. Perception is merely tolerated and passed over. Precision is rewarded while sensitivity is quietly dismissed as sweet.

The study of poetry can ignite the imagination. However, keep this guideline in mind. The poem you choose should contain an idea that can be readily translated to the purpose of communicating a feeling, whether verbally, or in prose, or even in a fledgling poem. Allow a student to share thoughts and feelings with the class, or to keep them private by writing them down in a diary. He/she may even be inspired to write a poem.

Emily Dickinson, considered one of the greatest American poets, writes short, precise, thought provoking poetry. Note the following piece:

I Never Saw a Moor

I never saw a moor,
I never saw the sea;
Yet I know how the heather looks,
And what a wave must be.

I never spoke with God,
Nor visited in heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the chart were given.

To assure that students do not miss the point of a poem, one or two clue questions can be put to the class in general to set the mood. For the above selection one such question might be: Do you ever feel that you really know what something is like though you've never seen it? Later on you might assign the following task: Write something about places or people you feel sure you know something about, but have never been to or met.

Activities of this sort are of themselves a learning experience. They demand concentration and emotional involvement. For a few minutes a week shift pedagogical focus from linguistic accuracy to the dynamic use of language for itself. This is, after all, the affective side of learning. This is what involves the emotions. It enhances the ability to explore and be delighted by our discoveries. It promotes the ability to empathize and reflect. Most of all, it provides a non-threatening vehicle for self-expression. Students are given the opportunity (through poetry) to express their personalities effectively. This process engages the learner in a special dialogue with his/her feeling system which is still in the stages of growth in the target language. A poem reflects an idea that gives a student a workable form to use for the expression of that feeling system.

The use of poetry in the language class should be regarded

as a prolific tool. The four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing can be exploited to advantage here. Discussion and self-expression exercises account for speaking. Listening skills are improved by means of class recitation, individual recitation, teacher recitation, and poem performance on tape. Reading skills become acute due to silent reading time in class and teacher--or student-initiated comprehension questions. Many avenues can be opened to the writing skill. Students may record their thoughts on worksheets such as the one in the Appendix below. The use of cloze tests is useful as well.

Poetry can help the teacher set high pronunciation goals for students. It offers a myriad of possible nuances of sound and affords the student the richness of rhythm and rhyme. Poetry challenges the ear as well as the spirit. Listening to poetry creates an environment of deep concentration, so that a student is not totally passive as he/she listens.

Music is the universal language
of mankind,
Poetry their universal pastime
and delight.

Longfellow

Music is a delicious addition to the poetry class. The selection chosen should be appropriate to the style and historical background of the poem. There is a wide variety of tapes available. Such American composers as Aaron Copland, George Gershwin, and Leonard Bernstein have a body of work pleasing to every taste. The teacher can create an intellectually stimulating environment by reciting the poem while the music is playing. Then have individuals recite as well. Music is evocative and helps the learner recall and re-tell what he/she felt as he/she was reading the poem. Music fills the air

and the poet's moment is captured and trapped in the learner's cognitive system. The musical complement embellishes the quality of the poetic words. Moreover, poetry can begin to give the learner a sense of what American art is all about.

Poetry is the show-case for all the wonderful playful things that can be done with language. It is not necessary to teach poetry per se. Just allow students to enjoy it. Let them revel in the alliteration or onomatopoeia or imagery of the piece. Having fun in class will raise motivation and self-esteem.

The first verse of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Bells" is a shining example of precise rhythm and rhyme. Think "what a world of merriment" this verse can evince in your class.

THE BELLS

Hear the sledges with the bells----
 Silver bells!
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
 How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle
 In the icy air of night!
 While the stars that oversprinkle
 All the heavens seem to twinkle
 With a crystalline delight;
 Keeping time, time, time
 In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
 From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
 Bells, bells, bells----
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

The study of music and literature bring peace and peace of mind to many. Poetry usually deals with universals. Hence, the communicative benefit derived from shared emotions with the poet is an essential factor in making presentations successful.

APPENDIX

The following is a sample of a poetry appreciation worksheet for students.

Student Worksheet	
Poem & Poet:	
Free Expression: Thoughts to share with others	Private Thoughts: My imagination told me
New Words to add to my vocabulary	Pronunciation Practice: I like the sound of...
My favorite line in the poem is: _____	

Written expression (Suggestions made by the teacher.)	
Why don't I write my thought on _____ ?	

