

POETRY AND THE ENHANCEMENT OF LANGUAGE ARTS EDUCATION

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Why should we use poetry in language teaching?

- **Poetry can motivate:**

It can enhance appreciation for the beauty of the language.
It can speak to a student's deepest feelings and concerns.
Students at all levels can get a feeling of accomplishment from creating a piece of writing which has beauty and expressiveness, even if they lack sophisticated technical knowledge of the language and have difficulty with longer pieces.
Creating something beautiful from the student's cultural heritage or personal experience validates both the student and the culture.

- **Poetry promotes personal growth and interpersonal understanding:**

It allows students to communicate with each other through their deepest feelings and most meaningful personal experiences.
It promotes their understanding of other cultures in the same way.
It helps make them keen, active observers of both their inner and outer worlds.
Like all artistic expression, it helps them "let off steam" in a creative, positive way.

- **Poetry has overall educational benefits:**

It promotes authentic and concise writing vs. empty and over-used abstractions.
It stimulates higher thought processes like metaphorical and synthetic thinking.
It stimulates creativity through divergent thinking.
By exposing students to unusual modes of meaning and expression, it encourages the formation of richer, more complex semantic codes.
It encourages active, involved reading.
Both reading and writing poetry introduce the student to a wide variety of genres, literary devices, voices, and styles.

- * **Poetry has specific benefits for second-language acquisition:**

It can help increase awareness of the sounds and rhythms of the language.
It acquaints the student with a variety of registers, dialects, etc.
By allowing for use of smaller syntactical units, it encourages experimentation and flexibility of expression, which in turn may promote fluency.
Less concern with syntactical requirements allows students to explore the expressive power of individual words, as well as subtle nuances of word meaning.
The need to express a deeply felt meaning can lead to increased awareness, and hopefully acquisition, of syntactical and grammatical points.

POETRY AS A PEDAGOGICAL TOOL: SOME THEORY

Poetry is an ideal vehicle through which to convey an appreciation of the dynamic, elusive, and multifaceted nature of words, and to encourage both conceptual and emotional development. Some advantages of poetry-based activities are as follows:

- Poems provide rich context containing varied and subtle meanings.
- Poems tend to employ words on a variety of levels ranging from the concrete, sensory level through the highly abstract; these levels interact in a continuous, multidirectional manner.
- Poems encourage the reader to form visual images, which, like eidetic imagery in experience, might help form memory traces of words.
- Poems make use of metaphor, a form of higher-order thinking.
- Poems are often rich in emotional expression, and can activate a wide variety of feelings in the reader. According to Vygotsky, emotions – including specifically those found in poetry – provide an important developmental link to creativity and the formation of ideas during adolescence (Vygotsky, 1994).
- Related to the previous idea, poetry can help move thinking to a higher level by encouraging “liberation from earlier, more primitive forms of cognition” toward “advanced forms of imagination.” Though not specifically with relation to poetry, Vygotsky asserted that “a more profound penetration of reality demands that consciousness attain a freer relationship to the elements of that reality, that consciousness depart from the external and apparent aspect of reality that is given directly in perception” (Vygotsky, 1987).
- Because of its inherent ambiguity, poetry is ideal for promoting both exploratory thinking and interaction between varied perspectives within a group context.
- Because the same word can be used in many different ways to achieve a variety of meanings and effects, poetry can help learners become aware of the fluid, contingent nature of word meanings. Vygotsky argued that word meanings “change. . .with the various ways in which thought functions,” and that we need to find out “the way they function in the live process of verbal thought” (Vygotsky, 1986, pp. 216-217). Being “alive” with layers of meaning, poetry can heighten and accentuate this process.
- Due to the subtle, precise and subjective nature of word choice, and the consequences this has for understanding the poet’s meaning, it is possible that poetry can promote a heightened awareness of translation differences. This could make the existence of L1 interference – and the necessity of understanding the precise L2 concept – more apparent.
- Poems can be used to great advantage at all levels of proficiency. Since their impact is achieved mainly through choice of words, many poems can be appreciated without sophisticated knowledge of grammar and syntax.
- For Vygotsky, a “real” concept “implies a certain position in relation to other concepts, i.e., a place within a system of concepts” (1986, p. 172). Most poems could be seen as providing these in abundance, in that they contain *networks of meaning* in which words are interrelated in discernable patterns. It therefore seems worth exploring the possibility that poetry writing can make a significant contribution to the development of conceptual thought.

Suggested approaches for eliciting personal poetry writing:

1. Introduction: poetic "diction"
2. Read poems based on sense memories (Nikki Giovanni, etc.). Assign sense lists, to be done from memory and/or current experience. Write poems from models.
3. Have students read a variety of poems having to do with native country, memories of relatives and other people, values, culture shock, wars, seasons, holidays, etc.
4. Point out how the use of specific sensory images helps us enter into the poet's experience and makes the poem alive and interesting. *Keep doing this!!*
5. Gradually point out other means by which poets use the language in novel or expressive ways -- e.g. simile and metaphor, unusual use of words, repeated words & sounds
6. While allowing for exceptions, discourage use of rhyme at first, except as an occasional variation. It can be constricting for beginners and lead to forced, "stilted" writing.
7. Do word-play and free-association activities (e.g. magnetic word kits, anagram poems).
8. Do activities that contrast how similar themes and ideas are expressed in poetry and prose. Some of the following books have other suggestions for studying the nature of poetic expression, exploring word choice, etc.

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A. Teaching Resources

- Bradley, Buff. *Growing From Word Play Into Poetry*. LEARNING Handbooks, 1976.
- Brainard, Joe. *I Remember*. Penguin Books, 1975. (not specifically for teaching, but valuable for examples of specific memories; a classic)
- Collom, Jack and Sheryl Noethe. *Poetry Everywhere: Teaching Poetry Writing in School and in the Community*. New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1994.
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- Gensler, Kenereth and Nina Nyhart. *The Poetry Connection: An Anthology of Contemporary Poems with Ideas to Stimulate Children's Writing*. Teachers & Writers, 1978
- Heard, Georgia. *For the Good of the Earth and Sun: Teaching Poetry*. Heinemann, 1989. (Full of wonderful personal experiences with younger students, but applicable to all)
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- Koch, Kenneth and Kate Farrell. *Sleeping on the Wing: An Anthology of Modern Poetry With Essays on Reading and Writing*. Vintage, 1981.

Maley, Alan and Alan Duff. *The Inward Ear: Poetry in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge, 1989. (Has great activities for discovering how poems "work")

Muller, Lauren, ed. *June Jordan's Poetry for the People: A Revolutionary Blueprint*. Routledge, 1995.

Tsujimoto, Joseph I. *Teaching Poetry Writing to Adolescents*. NCTE, 1988.

Widdowson, H. G. *Practical Stylistics*. Oxford, 1992. (More advanced; shows how poets use elements of language to achieve subtle effects)

Woolridge, Susan G. *Poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life With Words*. NY: Clarkson Potter, 1996. (Highly recommended for "getting into the spirit" of poetry as well as for specific ideas)

See also the many excellent publications of the Teachers & Writers Collaborative, including their bi-monthly magazine. Address: 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306.

Magnetic Poetry Kits are available at all large bookstores (Borders, Barnes & Noble).

B. Anthologies

Algarin, Miguel and Bob Holman, eds. *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe*. Henry Holt and Co., 1994.

Barnstone, Tony, ed. *Out of the Howling Storm: The New Chinese Poetry*. Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1993.

Blum, Joshua, Bob Holman and Mark Pellington. *The United States of Poetry*. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995. (A marvelous collection of American poets of varied races, classes and walks of life. The 2-video set is a treasure and can be ordered for \$29.95 at 1-800-647-3600. Also on audio cassette and CD.)

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C. Additional Recommended Reading

- Ahsen, A. The triple code model for imagery and psychophysiology. *Journal of Mental Imagery* 8(4), 15-42; 1984.
- Fox, John. *Finding What You Didn't Lose: Expressing your truth and creativity through poem-making*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1995
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The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 1 (pp. 339-350). New York: Plenum Press,
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A few recommended 20th century poets (with apologies for the glaring omissions):

Julia Alvarez, Maya Angelou, Margaret Atwood, The Beatles, Robert Bly, Evan Boland,
Gwendolyn Brooks, Dana Bryant, John Ciardi, Lucille Clifton, Billy Collins, e.e. cummings, Bei
Dao, Bruce Dawe, Rita Dove, Bob Dylan, Stephen Dunn, Alfred Encarnacion, Robert Frost,
Nikki Giovanni, Donald Hall, Seamus Heaney, Linda Hogan, Garrett Hongo, Langston Hughes,
Julia Kasdorf, Jane Kenyon, Jusef Komunyakaa, Karla Kuskin, Philip Larkin, Tato Laviera, Li-
Young Lee, Denise Levertov, Wing Tek Lum, Eve Merriam, Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, Ogden
Nash, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), Naomi Shahab Nye, Mary Oliver, Marge Piercy,
Adrienne Rich, Catalina Rios, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Leslie Marmon Silko, Shel
Silverstein, Peter Skryznecki, David Slavitt, Gary Soto, William Stafford, Dylan Thomas, Derek
Walcott, Anne Waldman, William Carlos Williams.

There are also many websites for students, teachers, and others that can be searched according to
interest. One example:

Poetry 180: A poem a day for American high schools

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/p180-list.html>