

In the Classroom

En Classe

This section presents descriptions of teaching techniques or practical classroom activities.

Cette section est consacrée à la description de différentes techniques ou activités d'enseignement.

WRITING POETRY IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

Michael Langevin

Writing poetry is now recognized as a valuable tool in teaching English native speakers. It can also be adapted for use by second and foreign language teachers. I have used it successfully in my classes to supplement the regular writing program. Some teachers may object that most native speakers can't write poetry. Everyone can write some kind of poetry, given the proper encouragement and guidance. The primary aim is to have the students express themselves in English, not to have them write first class verse.

Prose and poetry can both be defined as the skilful use of words in a concentrated fashion in order to communicate a thought, a feeling, or an experience. Good poetry uses the writer's imagination to communicate a sense of discovery and wonder. These are universals; they cross all cultural and linguistic barriers. Writing poetry, like writing prose, is an active involvement with language on several levels: the control of words, of structure, and of content. The relevance to second language learners is obvious: it provides the student with a practical, concentrated experience in many aspects of the language. Powell (1973:13) points out, "Once a pupil has written and then re-worked his own pieces, he has experience with functional grammar, spelling, and syntax." Writing poetry can exploit the natural curiosity most people have in discovering the possibilities of language. When students have the desire to communicate, providing them with the means, in this case poetry, may help them to overcome their apprehensions by giving them a sense of accomplishment. My students have always been amazed that they could actually write poetry in English, and they were very proud of their work.

Note that writing poetry should be integrated into the overall prose

writing program, and only used occasionally to provide variety. The two skills reinforce one another, but must be kept separate. Students should be warned that sentence fragments sometimes found in free verse are not acceptable in prose writing.

The program is best introduced gradually. In the early stages the teacher could read musical poems aloud in order to generate a sense of curiosity and fun about poetry. The verses should be relatively simple to start with, and very rhythmical. It is perhaps best to begin with nursery rhymes and nonsense verses which use language in a playful way. Once this groundwork has been laid the students' interest will translate into a desire to try writing themselves. Some will probably have already written poems in their mother tongues. However, the teacher should be wary of any preconceived notions they might have about poetry. They should understand that poems need not necessarily rhyme. In fact, rhyme should be avoided, as it is very difficult, and will probably discourage beginners.

The program can be used with students from the secondary level onwards (teenagers), starting at an intermediate level. At the beginning the writing will be more structured, gradually becoming freer until the students are finally writing complete poems on their own.

Powell suggests a number of simple poetic forms to begin with. For example, with, 'What Is It?', the student selects any topic s/he is interested in, then s/he writes about it using as many of the five senses as s/he can. S/he uses only one word, an adjective, for each sense. The last word of the poem is the subject, and thus the title.

sight - brown
smell - thick
sound - squish
touch - cool
subject - mud

The teacher explains the form carefully, reads several examples, writes them on the board, and then elicits topics and generates enthusiasm by general discussion. The class is then given from five to twenty minutes to write, depending on the length and difficulty of the task. Afterwards, the students can share their creations with others by passing them around in groups, or even by reading some aloud for the class. This audience will help motivate them, as well as let them see different approaches to the same subject. They should also be encouraged to re-work their poems after discussion with the teachers and other students.

Another model Powell suggests is the three word poem consisting of a noun, a verb, an an adverb. Example: Birds fly lazily. The first and last words can start with the same letter: Snakes crawl silently. With beginners

the teacher can eliminate one of the words and have the class fill it in.

As the class progresses more difficult models can be used. For example, a three line poem; the first line for the weather, the second line is the place, and the third line is a feeling. Here are several examples by my students at the International Language School in Taiwan.

Home

Grey curly-tailed clouds
Dancing over the lake
Gracefully wave me homesick.

- Angela W.

Dream

Heavy rainy thundering night,
Forest birds, animals escape -
The end of the world.

- Cathy C.

Storm

Cloudy sky, lightening and thunder.
Crowded ants wait under my balcony,
Bored, gloomy, and disgusted.

- Wendy H.

Later on themes like nature, dreams, education, love, war, memories, and so on can be introduced. Since these themes should be interesting to the students it would be preferable to have the class participate in their selection. Another idea is to show the class a painting or play some music to them, and have them use these as inspirations for poems. Or the teacher could read a short prose passage and have the class ‘translate’ it into verse.

If a student feels blocked, Rico (1983) suggests having him or her write the title or theme in the center of a page and circle it. Then tell the student to write down every word that comes into his or her head, without censoring any, until s/he feels finished. More often than not the words grouped on the page will trigger something s/he can express. Example:

	- howls	
in the trees -		- winter
cold -		- and rain
races -	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">WIND</div>	- roars
		- rages
on the sea -		- whistles
	- wild	

The rugged winter wind
Roars and rages
Across the frozen sea.

In the poetry writing program the students help to develop their self-expression in English by reading, writing, speaking (reciting), and listening to others recite or read. With these activities as a supplement to a solid, sequential program of prose writing, the students' writing will improve as well as their appreciation for a refined use of language.

REFERENCES

- Powell, Brian. (1973). *Making Poetry*. Collier-MacMillan Canada Ltd.
Rico, Gabriele Lusser. (1983). *Writing the Natural Way*. Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher Inc.

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