

## Using poems to develop productive skills

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You and your students might already enjoy reading and listening to poetry in your own language and perhaps in English too. Poems are, after all, authentic texts. This is a great motivator. Poems are often rich in cultural references, and they present a wide range of learning opportunities. For me, the aim is to teach English through poetry, not to teach the poetry itself, so you don't need to be a literature expert.

Most of the tried and tested activities used regularly by language teachers can be adapted easily to bring poetry into the classroom.

### **Communicative speaking activities**

Before doing any productive work, I like to give my students plenty of pre-reading activities so that they are adequately prepared.

- As a way in to a poem, I might play some background music to create the atmosphere, show some pictures to introduce the topic, and then get students to think about their personal knowledge or experience which relates to this topic.
- They then talk about the poem, first with a partner and then in small groups, perhaps coming together as a class at the end to share ideas. I monitor and feed in ideas and vocabulary if necessary, give brief feedback on language used and note any language problems to be dealt with at a later date.
- I usually prepare worksheets for pre-reading speaking activities which might involve a quiz, a questionnaire, sentence stems to be completed and discussed, statements to be ranked and discussed, and so on.
- Students might predict endings to verses, the whole poem, or events occurring after the end of the poem.
- Afterwards, the students could talk about their personal response to the poem, discuss the characters and theme, or debate the moral issues.
- Role plays work well, interviewing a partner, or even dramatising the poem and making a video. Students could compare poems on related topics, with different groups working on different poems and then regrouping to pool their ideas.

### **Working on pronunciation**

It can be fun to get students to rehearse and perform a poem. I read the poem to them or play a recording, and they identify the stresses and pauses.

- We take a chunk (usually a line, sometimes two) at a time, and one half of the class claps out the rhythm while the other half beats time, and then they swap over.
- I recite while they mumble rhythmically, and then as their confidence grows they could chant in a whisper, a shout, or show a range of emotion. For me, this tends to work best when it is improvised. I keep it snappy - it's a high energy activity, and you have to know and trust each other!
- I sometimes do intensive phoneme work centred on the rhyming patterns in the poem: Some poems are crying out to be exploited in this way. I elicit possible rhymes before revealing the poet's choice, and discuss which

suggestions have exactly the same sound and which don't, leading to a minimal pair activity.

### **Writing activities**

A poem can spark off some wonderful creative writing. Students can add more lines or stanzas individually or in pairs or groups.

- They can write a letter to a character in the poem, write about what happened before the beginning or after the ending of the poem and so on.
- Students could use the poem as a starting point and model for some parallel writing: Each group might contribute a verse to a collective poem (or rap).
- Genre transfer presents a lot of opportunities for writing practice; letters, diary entries, radio plays, newspaper articles, agony aunt columns all based on the original text from a poem.
- My students have found reformulation exercises very stimulating, where they switch between formal and informal language.
- Longer poems can be summarised in fifty words.
- It is also fun to get students to transform content words to synonyms or antonyms and then discuss the subtleties of vocabulary.

### **Some pros and cons**

You might need to spend a bit of time finding a poem that links thematically with your scheme of work, and making sure you respect the copyright rules.

- I have rejected poems that are too long, too archaic or too obscure, or that I can't muster any enthusiasm for or that the students may not respond to. The wrong poem is worse than no poem at all.
- I find that I need to explain my pedagogical rationale and the aims of activities very clearly, and students who have disliked studying literature in their own language may need extra motivation.
- I sometimes reassure my students that their other needs, e.g. exam preparation, are being met.
- It's worth taking the risk and using poems though, because poems can foster a love of English, and they are so versatile.
- I have used them as warmers or fillers, and as the catalyst for many different activities with students ranging from Pre-intermediate to Proficiency, and with multilevel classes.
- Students find a poem a welcome, and sometimes inspirational, change from a coursebook. Poems can be involving, motivating and memorable, and they can supplement and enrich just about any lesson.

### **Conclusion**

One of the things I like most about using poetry in the classroom is that I can usually create lots of opportunities for personalisation. This means that the students have plenty to say, and the communication is genuine because they are talking about their own experiences or hypotheses. They are engaged and motivated, which helps to make the lesson and the language (and sometimes even the poem) memorable. I am an English language specialist and have no formal training in literature, unlike some of my students, and I bring my love of poetry into the classroom.

You can't fake enthusiasm, but it can rub off on the most sceptical of students, and without it the lesson is doomed. My students have always asked for more grammar, but now they're asking for more poems too, something they didn't even know they wanted! For me, there is no greater reward.

**Further reading**

These are resource books of ideas and activities for using poems in the English language classroom. They contain useful bibliographies of poetry anthologies too.

**Literature in the Language Classroom** Collie & Slater CUP 1987

**Literature** Duff & Maley OUP 1990

**Teaching Literature** Carter & Long Longman 1991