

An American Poetry Project for Low Intermediate ESL Adults

By *Kristin Lems* (United States)

“In my position teaching at a large urban university in Chicago, I work with adult immigrants between 18 and 65 years of age. As working adults, they have a pragmatic attitude toward their studies. There are few if any motivation problems, and they do nearly any amount of homework I assign. Upon completion of their ESL classes, some of them leave the university and others continue with university studies. Of those who stay in the university, most study business or computers.”

After advising some students who were exiting our program about their future courses, I realized that many of them would go immediately into their specialization coursework, perhaps taking only one required composition course, and thus never encountering any literature in their studies. Colleges in the United States assume students beginning undergraduate studies have had exposure to American literature in secondary school, but this is not the case with immigrant students.

As a result, I decided to create an opportunity for my students to encounter English language literature before they finished their English classes. To do this, I put together a poetry unit, featuring one American poem each week. I invited a colleague teaching at the same level to do the unit on poems in tandem with me during our ten-week quarter. The purpose of this article is to present some preliminary results of the poetry unit after teaching it for two quarters.

Preparation

Over a holiday break, I sat down with 20 literary anthologies and started picking out poems. I decided to confine my choices to American poetry because my students are immigrants to the U.S., and I wanted them to get a sense of American literature. Furthermore, some students seemed to labor under the mistaken belief that the only "real" literature in English emanates from England. After many hours of reading, I put together a list of 18 poems that had a moderate vocabulary load, compelling topics, and reasonable length. I gave my students copies of the poems on the first day of class. For the second quarter, I cut the original list of poems to 16, which still left enough to work with in a ten-week term.

In setting up the project, the other teacher and I wanted to try several different ways of integrating the poetry into the rest of the curriculum. First, we each taught one poem once a week, for about 30 minutes, through direct instruction, and supplemented it with related materials, such as songs. The students made notations on their handouts and enjoyed the line-by-line analysis, jotting down many new vocabulary words along the way. Second, we invited students to write about the poems in their journals. This was to give students an opportunity for a more thoughtful, personal response to the poems than the classroom setting permitted. Finally, both of us assigned one of the poems as a composition topic.

Since I am a teacher who enjoys the spoken arts and I routinely engage students in singing songs and acting out skits, I also included a performance component in my classes. This was the riskiest part of all. I asked my students to read the poems during their time away from school and, by the third week, to choose a poem to memorize. During the eighth week of school, they would perform their poem, memorized, for the rest of the class, as I videotaped the performances. At the end of the performances, there would be a celebratory party and we would view the video. To prepare them for their performances, I put the students in small groups every week, and they practiced reading the poems out loud for each other. Later in the quarter, as their performance date came nearer, they performed their memorized poems in small groups and offered each other friendly feedback.

In addition to all of these activities, the other teacher and I kept a dialog journal together about teaching the poetry unit at the same time. We felt this was a good way to capture our reactions before they dissipated. The journal was especially useful because we taught on different shifts and never saw each other. As the teacher on the later shift, I often got a useful tip-or warning-from him about the success or lack of success he had had with certain poems. Conversely, he often came after I wrote in our journal and got an idea from my entries about how to revisit a certain poem.

Student performances

My greatest apprehension was that students would balk at the assignment of learning a poem by heart. Much to my surprise and delight, not a single student questioned the value of memorizing a poem. On the contrary, the idea was met with enthusiasm, and most declared that they had memorized poems in their native languages. Even the idea of performing for a video camera in front of the rest of the class did not faze them. In fact, every student during both quarters successfully performed a poem, even two students who ultimately failed the English class.

I invited the students to dress up for the day of the performances, and every student came in his or her nicest clothes. This was another indication to me that they had put a lot of time into the memorization, and that the project was meaningful and important to them. During the second quarter, I invited our dean to attend the performances, and this made the day even more special.

I'd like to quote one student's composition, where he tells which poem he had chosen to memorize and what it meant to him:

"I was very happy because our program included American poetry. This is a great opportunity for me to read poetry in English. I like poetry. I know many poems by heart in my native language. Unfortunately, I have lost the opportunity to keep reading much poetry. The problems of everyday life [limit] the time for poetry. Now I have a new start for reading poetry again. But this time, I will read it in English. That makes me happy.

When we read the first three poems, I chose "Annabel Lee" because it is a love story told by a man in a very sensitive way. This love story happened somewhere, we still don't know where. We don't know when it happened. We only know that it was many years ago and in a kingdom by the sea. I think the importance here is the love, not the place. Also it's not important how this

maiden looks. We don't know because he loves her for herself. He loves her by soul. This is more than just love. I like the rhythm of this poem. That was the additional reason that makes this poem lovely for me."

This response shows the student's keen awareness of the structure and sound of the poem, and also illustrates the role that studying poetry played for him in finding a part of himself that had been lost in America until now. In fact, he did a very dramatic rendering of "Annabel Lee" that would have made any oral interpretation teacher proud.

Many of the students chose to memorize the shorter poems, especially "Trees" and "The Arrow and the Song." In the second quarter, two students memorized the fabulous poem "Life Doesn't Frighten Me at All," by Maya Angelou, and a very shy woman successfully performed "The Road not Taken" by Robert Frost. Part of the fun of the unit was seeing which poems the students decided to memorize, and then finding out why.

Teacher dialog journal

Of all the poems on the list, the favorite in all four classes was "Richard Cory" by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Both semesters, we taught the poem and played the Simon and Garfunkel song by the same name. Here are excerpts about teaching that poem from the dialog journal the other teacher (D) and I kept:

K: We did "Richard Cory" today. They loved it! Everybody looked at me searchingly and said, "Why did he do it?" as if the answer were hidden in some vocabulary item. I asked them, "What do you think?" Two students immediately responded that it was "lonely at the top." When I asked, "What do you think the poet is trying to say?" one student said (in these very words), "Money can't buy happiness." We listened to the song, and it was a big hit! They were humming along.

D: I did the poetry unit on "Richard Cory." I'm curious what they'll write about it in their journals. I think they all liked it. One student mentioned that it reminded him of Ice T, who almost killed himself even though he had everything. They wanted my opinion. I asked what would make someone so lonely and desperate. Usually, poverty doesn't cause suicide. I mentioned other suicides of famous people who self-destructed through drugs, alcohol, and car racing.

We had very fruitful journal conversations about other poems and some very nice tie-ins to grammar we taught at that level. Here are excerpts from our journal from the week in which we taught the Longfellow classic "The Arrow and the Song":

K: First, I explained vocabulary for "The Arrow and the Song." It didn't take long at all! One student said he preferred "old English." When I explained that knew not meant didn't know, he said, "Why do we need didn't? The other way is better!" It became a great springboard for a mini-lesson in the two pronunciations of the and the /th/ sounds ("breathed"). Then I used the mini-lesson as a transition to teaching so and such. Can you believe it? How fortuitous! There are two

examples of so...that in the poem, one with an adjective and one with an adverb. Thanks, Henry, for providing a great opening for a grammar point!

Another poem that bore rich discussion was "Solitude" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox, which can be paired with the song "Everybody Loves a Winner" by Linda Ronstadt. Here are D's reflections on teaching the song in his class, and his observation that the students who excel in understanding poetry are not necessarily those who excel in the grammar lessons:

D: Today we did "Solitude." I read it through, explaining some of the words, and divided the class into three groups. Some people have an instant understanding and some don't get it. Apart from comprehension, there's no correlation between ability to grasp grammar and understanding of poetry. "Solitude" seemed to provoke more discussion than almost any other poem. The most important thing is that sometimes students blossom more with this kind of activity and are able to express themselves.

A poem with challenging language but lots of evocative images is "Sea Fever." Here is a brief excerpt from our dialog journal from my experience teaching it:

K: We did "Sea fever" and talked about "gold fever" and "Saturday night fever." It was really good because one student is an avid sailor, and he had a lot to say about the feeling on a ship.

Student Compositions

The simplicity of the language of Longfellow's "The Arrow and the Song" allowed intermediate-level students to enter the poem and construct their own personal meaning. Below are portions of two student compositions about the poem. The first student saw the poem as a moral lesson about giving to and getting back from friends. The second student also saw friendship as a central theme, but focused instead on the elusive quality of friendship, like a lost arrow, an especially poignant theme for an immigrant who has left friends behind.

Student 1: For me, this poem is a deep thought about life in any part of the world. In two words, "arrow" and "song," the author describes how our good or bad actions will come back to us throughout time. "Arrow" means action that we have toward people around us. The way that we help them, but not the help that is given because it is required by our job or that help that is given expecting to get something back in the future. I am talking about that help born from our hearts. "Song" is the spiritual support that we offer to friends who will need it. Why will our actions come back to us? Nobody wishes to be a friend of a bad person. If we are hypocrites, people will know it and we will lose our friends. I think the last part, "Long, long afterward," is when we have lived most of our life and we found that our help was really strong and solid. We have kept our friends and all of them are singing the song.

Student 2: The author in this poem describes a person who wants to find a lost friendship. In the first verse, he compared his loss of friendship with an arrow. The friendship, an arrow, escapes very fast. The poet can't catch it. He could not follow friendship because it escapes too quickly and he doesn't know where it is. In the second verse, he compares his longing for lost friendship with a song. He finds a song. His wish to find friendship is very strong. In my opinion, the poet

has told about a power of friendship. Somebody may ask "why?" I think because we may lose friendship very easily, but it is very, very hard to retrieve.

Recommendations

The poetry unit created a warm classroom rapport. Poetry allows students to bypass minor grammar points and go straight to meaning. However, the teacher must ask, can a student's interpretation of a poem ever be wrong? Although there is plenty of room for individual interpretation, there may come a point when a student's interpretation might need to be set right by careful rereading.

One example was the response of one student to a poem by Maya Angelou. When I passed around a photograph of Angelou, students realized she was African-American, and I believe this created a subtext for some of them. When we went over the poem line by line and I asked what the poem meant, one student said that it was about Maya Angelou's "dream of a better life for black people." I asked the student where she saw words that gave her that idea, since the poem is mostly about self-confidence and courage. It became apparent that she had read the word sleeve in the idiom "nothing up my sleeve" as slave. Lexical mistakes like this are more likely for second language students, so it is possible that a word can be misread and a poem misinterpreted. Perhaps the student would not have read the word that way if the photo had not been shown first. When I taught the poem a second time, I did not show a photograph of Angelou first, and I made sure to teach the idiom "nothing up my sleeve."

For ESL and EFL teachers considering a poetry unit, I recommend the following:

1. Know your students' proficiency level and choose accordingly. Poetry from elementary school or high school poetry anthologies -especially on nature themes-may work well.
2. Integrate the poetry as fully as possible into the syllabus. The poetry unit is more likely to be taken seriously if you mention it on the first day of class.
3. If you have a performance component, give plenty of time for in-class practice. Let students choose the poems they want to memorize. This way they will feel more ownership of the memorization process. Give plenty of encouragement. Consider memorizing your own poem, so that you can share the stress and success!
4. Include journals in the poetry unit to offer another outlet to those students who don't speak much in class.
5. Take notes on what works to improve the unit the next time you teach it. If possible, pair up with another teacher to teach the same poems in your classes and compare students' reactions.
6. Find poems with a variety of themes and styles, and keep adding to your collection.
7. Believe in the poems and the power of poetry. Most of your students already do. All they need is a little prompting from you.

Conclusion

When I run into my students from the two previous quarters, they joyfully recite their memorized poems just as well as the day they performed them in my class. I am confident they will remember these beloved verses right into old age, just like "the song from beginning to end...found again in the heart of a friend."

Poems used:

1. "Richard Cory" by Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)
2. "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)
3. "Recuerdo" by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)
4. "The Arrow and the Song" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)
5. "Hope is the thing with feathers" by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)
6. "Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)
7. "The Road not Taken" by Robert Frost (1874-1963)
8. "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" by Robert Frost (1874-1963)
9. "Solitude" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox (1850-1919)
10. "since feeling is first" by e.e. cummings (1894-1962)
11. "Life Doesn't Frighten Me" by Maya Angelou (born 1928)
12. "Love is not All" by Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)
13. "The Wind" by Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)
14. "Sea Fever" by John Masefield (1878-1967)
15. "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes (1902-1967)
16. "Trees" by Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918)

Richard Cory

by Edwin Arlington Robinson

*Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.
And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.*

*And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.*

*So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.*

The Arrow and the Song

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.*

*I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth I knew not where;
For who has sight so keen and strong,
That it can follow the flight of song?*

*Long, long afterward, in an oak,
I found the arrow still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.*

The Road Not Taken

By Robert Frost

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both*

*And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

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