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# Reading, Writing, and Performing Poetry

**T**he theme of this issue of *English Teaching Forum* is poetry. The poetry-related activities in this lesson plan can be used alone or in conjunction with the poems and articles found elsewhere in this issue. These activities will help you introduce your students to poetry in general and take them through the steps of reading and interpreting poetry in English. There are also activities to encourage students to write their own poems. You can select as many or as few activities as you wish.

## Talking about Poetry

To introduce your students to poetry, you might want to begin by having a general discussion about poetry.

1. Activate your students' background knowledge by asking such questions as:
  - Do you like poetry? Why or why not?
  - Who are your favorite poets?
  - Do you prefer reading poetry or listening to it being read aloud?
  - Do you ever write poetry yourself?
  - What language do you like to read poetry in?
2. Ask your students: "What are some words that come to mind when you think about poetry?" Write the words on the board as students say them.
3. Add the word *discovery* (unless a learner has already said it; in that case, go back and re-emphasize the idea of poetry as a method of discovery).
4. Tell your students that U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser said: "The writing and reading of poetry is the sharing of wonderful discoveries."
5. Ask your students:
  - What is meant here by a discovery?
  - Give some examples of things you can discover in a poem.
  - How would the discovery process be different for reading poetry than for writing it?
6. Tell your students that a former U.S. Poet Laureate, Robert Frost, said: "A poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom." Compare his quotation to Kooser's quotation.
7. Ask/tell your students:
  - What topics should a poet laureate write about? Make a list.
  - Are there any topics he or she should avoid? Why or why not?
  - Pretend you have just been named poet laureate of your city/school/university. Write your inauguration speech. Begin by deciding what points you think are important. If you are working in a group, everyone can help write the speech.

## Understanding Poetic Devices

Poetry in preliterate societies was passed from generation to generation by a strong oral tradition. Poetic devices such as the ones listed below helped the performers, including troubadours and minstrels, remember the structure and words of the poems they recited. Introduce your students to some of these poetic devices to help them write and memorize their own poems.

1. Ask your students if they know any poetic devices. They might already be familiar with metaphors, rhyming, and other devices. Ask them to give some examples.
2. Go over with your students the terms listed below. Give students examples and have them write some of their own examples.

**Alliteration** is the repetition of the same sounds, usually consonant sounds, at the beginning of words or stressed syllables. Some examples of alliteration are: cute cats; the sounds of silence; my mother made marshmallow cookies.

**Assonance** is the repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds, especially in stressed syllables, with different consonant sounds between them. Example: This chicken is similar to that one.

**Imagery** is the use of vivid or figurative language to represent objects, actions, or ideas. A poem has effective imagery when its words allow you to imagine that you can see, hear, smell, touch, or taste the things the poem describes.

**Kennings** are compound, figurative phrases used in place of a name or noun, especially in Old English and Old Norse poetry. For example, the sea was often called the *whale road* and a sword might be called a *battle friend*.

**Metaphors** are comparisons of two unlike things made without using *like* or *as*. The two things being compared are usually linked by a form of the verb *to be*. Examples: I am a rock. You are my sunshine.

**Onomatopoeia** is the use of sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to. For example, the word *buzz* sounds like the sound a bee makes. The word *hiss* sounds like a snake and the word *chirp* makes the sound of a bird. Using such words in a poem about these subjects creates a link between sound and meaning and allows the reader (or listener) to experience the poem more richly.

**Personification** is the assignment of human qualities, actions, or form to inanimate objects or abstract ideas. Examples: The wind coughed. The house groaned in the night. Love knocked on my door.

**Rhyme** is the repetition of the same sound in two different words. Poems do not have to rhyme, but they often do. Example: Words that rhyme with *rose* are *toes, nose, goes, foes, throws, shows*.

**Similes** are comparisons of two unlike things, usually using *like* or *as*. Example: My love is like a red, red rose.

3. Ask your students to think of any one-syllable word and write down all the words that rhyme with it. Remind them that words that rhyme are not always spelled in similar ways. You can begin the exercise by asking the class to give examples of words that rhyme with *rhyme*: *dime, lime, chime, grime, mime, slime, time, thyme, prime, I'm*. Tell students they can rhyme longer words by rhyming the final syllable or syllables. Examples: *nation, station, concentration, simulation*.
4. Review the definition of *kenning*. Write the below lists on the blackboard, and then see if your students can match the kennings to the nouns they represent.

Wave traveler	King
Whale road or island encircler	Parrot
Ring giver	Woman
Jewelry tree or peace weaver	Battle
Storm of swords	Teacher
Night caller	Boat
Homework giver	Sea

After doing this matching activity, encourage students to write their own kennings.

5. Divide the class into groups. Have each group write a poem using at least three of the poetic devices you discussed. The groups can choose their three devices, or you can assign different ones to each group.

### Interpreting Poems

As former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Frost said, “Poetry is what’s lost in translation.” There are metaphors, similes, rhythms, and nuances that can’t be translated word for word in everyday life, but even more so in poetry. This is one reason that reading and writing poetry in a foreign language classroom can often be confusing. However, that is all the more reason to keep reading and writing, as a means to understand deeper levels of the language. Encourage students to see the images a poem evokes and to talk about the words and phrases that don’t translate.

### Activity

Look at the poems “Bessie Dreaming Bear” and “Moonflowers” that appear in this issue and study the discussion questions for each poem. Ask your students similar questions about other poems you might use in the classroom. Remember to discuss imagery, metaphors, and other figurative language and to look for meanings that aren’t stated explicitly. We often call this “reading between the lines.”

## Using Poetry for Language Acquisition

### Activity 1: *Scrambled Poem*

Take photocopies of a poem and cut them into strips so that each strip contains one line of the poem. Give a complete set of strips (the whole poem) to each student or pair or group of students, depending upon how you want students to work. Have students try to put the strips in correct order by analyzing the poem and/or by listening to you read it. The first time you do this activity, it is good to use a short poem that has a chronological order, such as “Fog” (below). A variation of this activity would be to use longer poems and to put a different verse/stanza on each strip.

**Fog**  
by Carl Sandburg

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.

It sits looking  
over harbor and city  
on silent haunches  
and then moves on.

Instead of distributing copies of the lines of the poem, you can write it on the blackboard in scrambled order; for example:

over harbor and city  
and then moves on.  
The fog comes  
on silent haunches  
It sits looking  
on little cat feet.

Then ask students to write the lines in the correct order by analyzing the poem and/or by listening to you read it.

### Activity 2: *Reading with Expression*

Have students practice reciting poems with different emotions. They can read the same poem as if they are angry, sad, happy, proud, etc.

### Writing Original Poems

Just as reading poetry helps us see how a lot can be said in very few words, writing poetry helps us trim away side issues and focus on what we really want to say. The activities that follow use various methods to help students create their own poems.

### Activity 1: *Everyday Objects*

As a prewriting activity, give students copies of poems by Ted Kooser or Robert Frost. Discuss with your students how these poets bring everyday objects to life.

When students are ready to begin working on their own poems, ask them to pick an object, any object, and to write down everything that comes to mind about that object. Tell students that the idea is to brainstorm and start thinking about the object in different ways. When they write their poems, they might use only a little bit of what they initially wrote about their objects, or perhaps none of it.

Example: chair

*What does it look like (size, color, shape, special features, etc.)?*

Purple, soft, big

It has big arms, so I'm surrounded by purple.

Impressions in the seat cushion where I've been sitting

Purple like a grape or an eggplant

*What does it feel like?*

comfortable, soft, smooth, firm

I can read, watch TV, relax.

I can put a stool in front of it and put my feet on the stool and really relax.

It's heavy so it's hard to move it by myself.

*What does it sound like? (If it really has no sound, imagine a sound or assign a sound to another object, which may or may not have a sound.)*

It sounds like feathers. If feathers don't make noise, who cares? It sounds like feathers. It also sounds like music because I listen to music in the chair. And chimes—because if I close my eyes while sitting in the chair with the window open, I can hear the wind chimes of my neighbor.

*What does it smell like? (If it really has no smell imagine a smell.)*

It smells soft like my soap and my bathrobe. (I sit there after a shower.)

It smells like the flowers in the garden. (The chair is near the window.)

*What does it taste like? (If it really has no taste, or if you don't want to taste it, imagine a taste.)*

I really don't want to taste my chair, but I can imagine the taste of things I might taste while sitting in the chair. Popcorn, cashews, both of them crunchy.

### Activity 2: *Adopt a Different Point of View*

In this activity, you will ask your students to write from a point of view other than their own. Tell them to imagine that they are an object or an animal or some other person. Then instruct them to ask themselves questions about the object, animal, or person they selected.

You can give students an example like the following: What if I were the chair? Would people like me? Would I rather be a different color? Would I rather be in another part of the room? Would I like or dislike the persons who sit on me?

After students have written notes about the answers to such questions, ask them to write a poem from the point of view of the subject they chose.

### Activity 3: *Haiku*

A haiku is a Japanese form of poetry that has seventeen syllables, divided into three unrhymed lines using the formula 5-7-5. The first line has five syllables; the second line has seven syllables; the third line has five syllables. Usually the first line names or refers to the topic, the second line describes or exemplifies it, and the last line restates the topic in different words. Traditionally, the haiku contains imagery and includes a word that indicates in which season the haiku is set. Snow can indicate winter, daffodils can represent spring, etc., but the season word can also be more subtle. Here is a sample haiku:

An orange pumpkin  
Waits to be picked in the field  
Surrounded by friends

(The word that indicates the season is *pumpkin*, traditionally associated with fall.)

Claiming poetic license, you can be flexible with some of the rules of haiku, especially in the EFL classroom. Here are some basic guidelines:

1. Make sure your students understand what a haiku is. Give examples.
2. You can assign topics or allow students to write about whatever they choose. Brainstorm with the class to generate some ideas for haikus.
3. As a class, write one or more group haikus. Encourage students to contribute ideas, words, or entire lines while you write the haiku on the blackboard. This is a good time to check that students understand the difference between syllables and words.
4. Have small groups or individuals write their own haikus, later sharing them with the class.

### Activity 4: *Cinquain*

A cinquain, which has five lines, is a good structure to use to write poems about a particular subject. You could have students write a cinquain about a local event, a national holiday, their favorite activities, or anything they choose. The “formula” for a cinquain is:

Line 1: 1 word, a noun  
Line 2: 2 words describing the noun  
Line 3: 3 words describing an action  
Line 4: 4 words describing feelings  
Line 5: 1 word, a noun that is a different word for the first word

Write the outline on the blackboard. Then ask students to follow the outline to write their own cinquains. A cinquain about shopping might look like this:

Markets  
busy, crowded  
Farmers sell vegetables  
It's so much fun  
Shopping

### ***Rewriting***

Remind students that they do not have to write a perfect poem on the first try. Most professional poets make many changes and write many drafts of their poems before they consider them to be ready for publication (or performance).

### ***Using Poems in Other Lessons***

The reading and writing of poetry does not have to be limited to a lesson on poetry. Include poems in your other lessons when appropriate. It can be fun to sometimes have students write a poem about a particular topic after a lesson on that topic. You can encourage them to use particular vocabulary words in their poems, too. When you assign pre-determined structures, such as those used for haikus and cinquains, students have the opportunity to use the language both creatively and with discipline.

## **Performing Poetry**

### ***Part 1: Introduce the Poem***

Discuss the meanings and interpretations of one or more previously selected poems. This can be done in small groups, especially if each group will perform a different poem. Ask, or be sure students discuss, such questions as:

- What does the narrator (or poet) want to do?
- What does this poem remind you of?
- Which words are literal? Which words are symbolic or have figurative meanings or other connotations?
- What sensory images (sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste) are evoked?
- What are the emotions and moods of the poem?
- What sound effects can you find in the poem (alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia)?

### ***Part 2: Preparing Students to Perform***

Before students begin rehearsing, discuss with them various aspects of performing by asking them the following questions.

1. *How can you use your voice, your body, and the performance space to enhance the meaning of the poem?*

Ideas to discuss:

- **Voice:** You can modulate your voice, make it soft or loud, high-pitched or deep, speak slowly or quickly, use pauses, etc.
- **Body:** You can change your posture, use mime and gestures, etc.
- **Performance Space:** You can move around, move closer to or farther from the audience, hide in corners, make use of any furnishings, windows, doors, etc.

## 2. *How do actors prepare for their performances?*

Some tips from actors and other performers:

- Consciously try to relax before your rehearsals and performances: take deep breaths, close your eyes, visualize your performance, bend over and make yourself go limp like a rag doll.
- Practice breath control. You do not want to run out of breath and have to pause in the middle of a line where you do not want to pause. Speak from your diaphragm instead of your mouth.
- Warm up your voice and your body, just as you would before singing or playing a sport.
- Practice projecting your voice to the back of the room without yelling.
- Practice enunciation and articulation. Repeating tongue twisters can help.
- Rehearse the material until you know it so perfectly that your recitation seems natural.
- Practice establishing eye contact with the audience.
- Practice using facial expressions, but don't exaggerate unnecessarily. Rehearse in front of a mirror to get the look you want.

### Part 3: *Rehearsing the Poem*

1. Tell students they will be able to rehearse their performance in small groups.
2. Teach students how to give constructive feedback about the performances they will watch. Remind students that the purpose of feedback is to help students do a better job the next time. Tell students their feedback should include honest, helpful answers to the following questions:
  - Did the performer modulate his/her voice effectively and appropriately?
  - Did the performer enunciate clearly and pronounce words correctly?
  - Did the performer use his/her body to convey emotions and figurative meanings?
  - Did the performer use the space of the room effectively?
  - What emotion or emotions did the performer convey? Were these the same emotions the performer intended to convey?
3. Divide students into groups and have them perform their poems individually while the rest of the group evaluates their performance (and later gives them feedback).

### Part 4: *Performing the Poem*

Allow students to incorporate the feedback into a new performance of the same poem in front of the class during the next class period.

## Organizing Poetry Slams

In the 1980s, Marc Kelly Smith of Chicago, Illinois, introduced a new element to oral poetry by instituting *poetry slams*. Poetry slams are events where poets, new or unknown or otherwise, can go on the stage to an open mike (a microphone open for use by whoever wants to step up to it) and share their own poems in short time increments. Judges rate the performances, and at



the end of the night, a winner is declared. Today, poetry slams are one of the most widespread forms of popular poetry in the United States. According to Smith, “The purpose of poetry (and indeed all art) is not to glorify the poet but rather to celebrate the community to which the poet belongs.”

### *Organize a Poetry Slam in Your Classroom*

Make reading and writing and reciting poetry fun! The Poetry Slam Incorporated website (<http://www.poetryslam.com>) suggests rules to follow when organizing a slam. Here are some guidelines you might want to follow:

- Whoever recites a poem must also be the person who wrote it.
- Set a time limit. National Slam suggests three minutes, plus an extra ten seconds without penalty. Anyone who goes overtime has points deducted from the score. You might want your time limit to be shorter, depending on the level of the students.
- Focus on the poetry. National Slam suggests no props, costumes, or musical instruments.
- Establish scoring rules, if you want them, and how you will select judges. National Slam suggests five judges, selected from the audience (in your case, the classroom). Each judge gives the poet a score from 1 to 10. Drop the high and low scores, then add the middle three together for a total of 3 to 30.
- Have a Master of Ceremonies (MC) who can speak spontaneously without a script and encourage the “audience” to respond to the poets or the judges.

Although a poetry slam is a type of competition, in the classroom it is good to make it more collective than competitive. Involve the entire class. Make it a regular event by holding a poetry slam every month or so. Have students take turns being poets, judges, and hosts. Keep the classroom atmosphere light and accepting, the limits wide. Encourage all forms of poetry on any topic. The overall slam and the experience of the slam are more important than any one individual contribution.

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