Playing with Poems in the Language Classroom

Mia Lin, Tinghsi Elementary School

"**Something old, something new. Something borrowed, something true. And a Poetry Mood in my shoe.**" This poem is adapted from a good luck saying. It is an old saying which dates back to the Victorian era and many brides will try and ensure that they have something of each in their wedding outfit. When I saw it in the marvelous instructor Rebecca's workshop, I knew the saying exactly expressed what I had experienced in Cambridge.

Something Old is meant to represent the link with my own teaching belief and the teaching experiences particularly influenced by the past learning in England. **Something New** represents the good luck of getting the chance to be trained in Cambridge, and I come back bubbling over with new ideas. I do hope for successful applying all I have learned in my future teaching career. **Something Borrowed** is to represent the inspirational ideas from the teachers who come from different countries. The friendship will be there for me and in the future when help is needed. **Something true** in my heart is the symbol of appreciation and actualization. I really appreciate the learning community full of poetic grace. I am also inspired by the poems used in the excellent academic and social programme of activities, such as the "Touchable dreams" performed by Jeremy Harmer, the chant used in Amanda's class, and the poem reciting with instrument played by Chaz and Bill. The impressible moment helps me the implementation of using poems in my classes a reality.
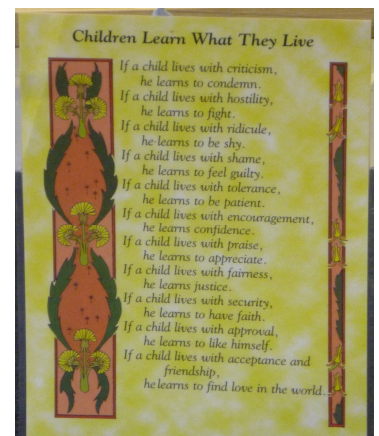
Research-Based Instruction

Most of the intervention programs involved pulling the students out of the classroom, so I decide that any new instructions have to be effective and involve all students instead of pullout students from class. I always have an interest in poetry and music. Not to mention I was delighted by the evening of poetry with dazzling artistry and high emotion delivered by Jeremy Harmer and Steve Bingham. I understand why the use of poems is ideal for its comparatively short text, fun subject matter, and easy match with the strategy of repeated readings (Rasinski, 2000). Perfect (2005) also pointed out how poetry's format "is especially suited to struggling or reluctant readers, and enhances reading motivation". All the findings help me believe that mastery of a short poem can cause students to feel confident and successful in learning English with fluency development.

P.O.E.M.S.

Using poems and songs while teaching English is a great way to expose our students to 'real English'. This is especially the case when using poems. When using poems to teach English, it can give the students the perfect chance to see creative and free thinking English. Poems can be used when teaching English in a variety of different ways. The more we use poems in the classroom, the more uses we will find for them. In the following statement, I use the acronym "P.O.E.M.S." to identify how poems can provide **P**ositive **O**pportunities of **E**nglish Speaking and Reading with **M**otivational **S**trategies for our students.

Positive Affections of the Whole Person

This is the main reason for using poems in my language classes, and in particular in elementary English classes which are heterogeneous in ability. The recent focus on language learning has unfortunately led to courses consisting almost entirely of the practice of language

exponents, and such interactional 'routines' as ordering a meal, buying food, and asking for directions. As English teachers, we are not just instructors but also fundamentally educationalists. It is our duty to contribute to the emotional, imaginative, and intellectual development of our students. Teachers can introduce students "user friendly poems", such as humorous poems by Shel Silverstein. His poems always address many common childhood concerns. Here is an example "Hug O'War".

I will not play at tug o' war.

I'd rather play at hug o' war,

Where everyone hugs

Instead of tugs,

Where everyone giggles

And rolls on the rug,

Where everyone kisses,

And everyone grins,

And everyone cuddles,

And everyone wins.

Teachers can post the poem on the wall as a "Class Poem", and stage the learners' encounter with a poem as to maximize its impact and thus to involve the learners actively in responses to the poem. The poem can be a warm-up activity to help students eager to use language when their emotions, feelings, and attitudes are engaged.

Opportunities for Gaining Experience of the World

Many poems are difficult to understand completely, but they use stylistic devices such as pace, stress, focus, repetition, onomatopoeia, etc., which facilitate global comprehension and effective response. Reading poems can thus help students develop the global language skills of identifying and interpreting assumptions and implications.

It has been a proven experience that poetry which is chosen carefully and used intelligently can open and enrich the content of language lessons. It can also provide useful opportunities for gaining experience of the world, and can contribute to the language development of young learners.

For young learners, research suggested that nursery rhymes are so beneficial in poetry appreciating and literacy acquisition. "Humpty Dumpty" is certainly the one to teach in the classroom. Humpty Dumpty is probably originally a riddle and one of the best known in the English-speaking world. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term "humpty dumpty" referred to a drink of brandy boiled with ale in the seventeenth century. The fact that "humpty dumpty" was also eighteenth-century reduplicative slang for a short and clumsy person. Humpty also appears in Through the Looking-Glass (1872), where he discusses some questions with Alice. Teachers can share some of the origin of this nursery rhyme with students.

The most common modern text is: Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again. Students are going to love learning more about this old favorite because it is fun to learn and

easily memorized.

English Speaking and Reading Skills Development

The main exposure during the poetry lessons is to the chunks of language and plenary interactions which follow the reading of the poems. The poem is a stimulus, not a model for emulation. Here is the practical Poem Reciting Cycle. Teachers should keep this in mind: components of repeated reading, listening-while-reading, assisted reading, and modeling were all equally important factors.

♦ 1. The teacher reads a new poem to the student (modeling)

♦ 2. The student reads the poem with the teacher (listening-while-reading and assisted reading)

♦ 3. The student reads the poem to the teacher (repeated reading)

♦ 4. The student reads the poem to people at home, gathering signatures as proof

♦ 5. The student reads the poem one last time to the class to prove mastery

Teachers can ask the children to reread it at home with a parent, or read to as many people as possible and gather signatures from listeners to verify the reading. Children can be prepared to read it aloud to the class the next day. This is an excellent exercise for them to read poems aloud with expression. It is also important to give them confidence.

Poems are also fantastic tools to learn about pronunciation. Children's poems usually follow some sort of rhyming pattern. Teachers can giude students to look at the individual sounds, rhyming words and pairs, connected speech or speech patterns. We can not only discuss these patterns with our class as we read the poem, but also ask them to shout out when
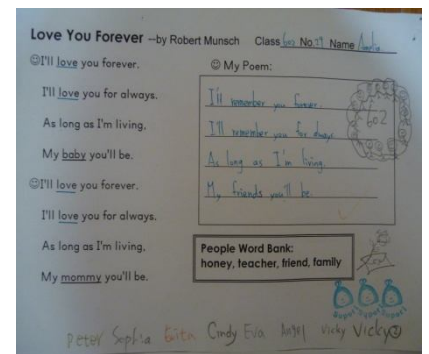
they hear a rhyming pattern. From here, we can also ask them to come up with their own rhyming verse or poem. So, the students learn vocabulary, basic grammar skills and patterns while appreciating pomes.

Motivational Activities for Students' Achievement

If an appropriate poem is used intelligently by a teacher who believes in the potential value of poetry, then that poem is capable of achieving some values such as valid motivations and responses, and the engagement of the 'whole person'. In order for poems to achieve some of the values listed above, it is important that the focus is not on difficult language but on responses to what has been understood.

Some researchers have found that students lose the sense of wonder and enthusiasm in enjoying poetry because of pre-teaching difficult items and setting questions on vocabulary and structures. It can reinforce the students' negative view of poetry. However, interesting pre-reading activities which focus on content and feelings of the poem can help the learners to take knowledge and experience to the poem, which make them want to read the poem without worrying about the words and structures they do not fully understand. Activities which can achieve this include (adapted from Chaz's instruction):
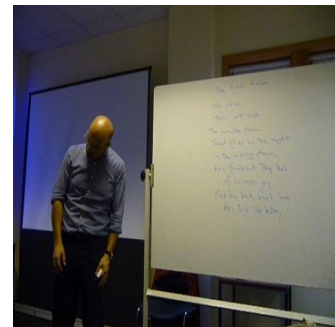
♦ predicting the poem's content from visual aids such as drawings, photographs, realia;

♦ using actions to accompany the poem;

♦ listening to or reading related songs, stories, scenes from plays;

♦ reading a poem in the mother tongue which is related to the theme;

♦ discussing topics related to the theme of the poem, to make the poem more memorable.

Strategies of Helping Students Enjoy Poems in Groups

A poem should be meaningful and enjoyable. It is important to select activities which encourage group work and promote curiosity and exploration of the literature. If teachers vary types of activities to promote class interaction, students won't feel dreadful and bored the next time we bring a poem to class. Here is an example (adapted from Amanda's speaking activities):

♦ Grouping Technique

Teachers should first divide the class into four homogenous ability groups and name the groups "A, B, C & D." Heterogeneous groups of four students should then be created. Teachers can create these groups by placing one A, one B, one C and one D student in each group. There will be four mixed ability groups of four students each.

♦ Teaching Procedure

1. Each group gets four copies of the same poem (each group works with a different poem).

2. Teacher asks group members to read the poem silently to themselves.

3. The group then reads aloud (each group takes turns as specified by the poem they selected.

4. Teacher asks the students to think about what the poem says to them and create two questions to ask about the poem.

5. The group then re-reads the poem aloud as before.

6. Each person in the group takes a turn telling the group what the poem said to them or meant to them during the first round.

7. During the second round, each person takes a turn asking the two questions they created about the poem.

8. Groups should be given time to engage in discussion about the varied meanings and about the questions they came up.

9. The teacher now asks the groups to select: 2 quotes from the poem, 1 response to what the poem said to them, 1 image from the poem.

10. At last, groups are asked to create a Mind Map poster. The group does this cooperatively.

Once students are finished with their posters, each group comes to the front of the class and put their poster to the blackboard. The group reads the poem, and then reports their mind map to the class.

It is not an easy task to find relevant, meaningful materials that can be modified to fit students' needs in terms of levels and interests. Especially for those teachers of higher grades who teach in multi level classrooms, it is often challenging to find successful grouping, differentiating instruction and materials selection. Integrating a grouping technique with commonly themed poetry related to a thematic topic can provide teachers with the ability to meet the needs of diverse learners, successfully group students and integrate meaningful poems into their classrooms.

Poems can be used as warm-ups, practicing pronunciation and speaking, reading exercises, listening activities, as well as for grammar presentation. They may be used for a whole class or for part of it. It is worth a try!

Conclusion

These are all simple but effective ways of getting our students actively engaged in the poem, thus bringing much more fun into the classroom. I am making it possible this semester to print off some poems that students rewrite as inserts for bookmarks, so that children can design the illustrations and voice recordings on the computer. All in all, I want children to remember their English poetry classes as being fun in every direction.

Poems in the classroom bring humor and pleasure to struggling students as well as advanced students. Poems also encourage them to read fluently and speak confidently. Above all, show our enthusiasm for the poems as all the instructors set good examples for the participants, because it will bubble over to the children and delight the young at heart.

At last, I would like to express my deepest appreciation. Thanks to Education Department of New Taipei City Government and British Council Taipei which sponsor the teachers; thanks to Principal Hu and Director Yvonne who make great efforts to make the dream of Cambridge learning come true; thanks to all the fellow teachers who give me support and laughter during the two weeks. I will keep the memory in my mind for Auld Lang Syne!
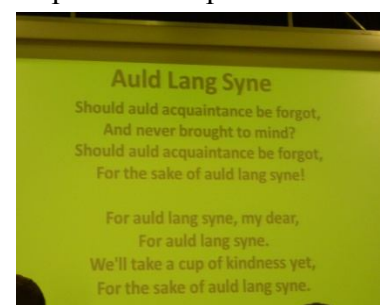
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