

# Using poetry with mixed ability language classes

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*This article first considers the potential value of using poetry with mixed ability classes. It then establishes criteria for the selection of texts and suggests ideas for using them in the classroom. Finally, the article exemplifies its main points by describing ways of using two different poems.*

## **The potential value of poetry**

I would like to start this article by answering some of the typical objections to using poetry in language lessons, and then to move on to consider some of the very positive gains which can be achieved by using poetry.

*'The learners find poetry difficult and boring in their own language, never mind in a foreign one.'*

Many learners are put off poetry in their mother tongue as a result of having to 'study' it as an academic discipline which involves background reading and close textual analysis. I have found that many such learners enjoy poetry in a foreign language if they are encouraged and helped to respond to it globally and imaginatively.

*'We are trying to help our learners to communicate in contemporary colloquial English, not in stilted poetical terms.'*

The main exposure during my poetry lessons is to the contemporary colloquial English of the group and plenary interactions which precede and follow the reading of the poem(s). The poem is a stimulus, not a model for emulation.

*'We are aiming to increase the communicative competence of our learners, not to produce poets.'*

The main objective of using poetry in language lessons is not to teach the learners to write, or even appreciate poetry, but to find a means of involving the learners in using their language skills in an active and creative way, and thus to contribute to the development of their communicative competence.

*'Most authentic poems are very difficult to understand, even for native speakers, as their meaning is rarely overt and their use of language is idiosyncratic.'*

Many poems are difficult to understand completely, but they use stylistic devices (e.g. of pace, stress, focus, repetition, onomatopoeia, etc.) which facilitate global comprehension and effective response, and help the learners to discover covert meaning. Reading poetry can thus help to develop the important language skills of identifying and interpreting assumptions and implications.

*'We only have a few hours a week to teach our learners the basics of English, and so poetry is a luxury we cannot afford.'*

In this situation I have found that sometimes using poetry (and other forms of literature) as the basis for intelligent communication activities has contributed far more to the acquisition of language and the development of language skills than a total concentration on the presentation and practice of language items.

**Positive gains** The following are my main reasons for using poetry in language classes, and in particular in those classes which are heterogeneous in ability:

- Educational value** As language teachers, we are fundamentally educationalists and not just instructors, and it is our duty to contribute to the emotional, imaginative, and intellectual development of our learners. The recent focus on language functions has unfortunately led to courses consisting almost entirely of the learning and practice of exponents of such functions as inviting, instructing, accepting, declining, greeting, and inquiring, and such interactional 'routines' as ordering a meal, buying a ticket, and asking for directions. While the content of such courses is obviously important for 'survival' in a second-language environment, it is of trivial educational value and has contributed to a narrowing and restricting of the content of language lessons and to a *diminishment* of language learners. It has been my experience that poetry (if chosen carefully and used intelligently) can open and enrich the content of language lessons, can provide useful opportunities for gaining experience of the world, and can contribute to the development of the 'whole person' as well as the 'learner of a language'.
- Affective value** It has been my experience that 'average' language learners are most motivated, most open to language intake, and most eager to use language when their emotions, feelings, and attitudes are engaged. One way of achieving this is to 'stage' the learners' encounter with a poem in such a way as to maximize its impact and thus to involve the learners actively in responses to the poem and the language activities built around it.
- Achievement value** Most language learners are initially daunted by poetry in a foreign language and would certainly put up barriers if told they were going to 'do' poetry. However, I have found that if poems are met as parts of larger communication activities, and if the teacher helps to make them accessible through pre-reading activities focused on content rather than language, then many learners are able to give valid responses to poems and thus to gain a considerable sense of achievement.
- Individual value** Poems have the great potential value of appealing to each individual reader in different ways and of being accessible on many different levels of meaning. Thus, a carefully chosen poem can help all members of a mixed ability group to achieve something. The weakest can achieve at least a superficial but satisfying global response to the poem (even if it is only a vaguely felt emotion or attitude), whereas the 'middle' learners can get further into the poem, and the brightest can gain the great satisfaction of imaginative and individual insights into the potential meanings of a poem.
- Stimulus value** Poems which achieve affective responses from learners can stimulate them to unusually intelligent and creative use of language in follow-up activities. This achievement can bring great satisfaction and pride, and I have found it can even lead to more accurate and appropriate use of language in follow-up activities which challenge and engage the new-found pride.

**Skills development** Poems more than any other type of text can give valuable opportunity for learners to use and develop such important skills as deduction of meaning from linguistic and situational context; prediction; relating text to knowledge and experience of the world; reading creatively; and the recognition and interpretation of assumptions and inferences. Many EFL/ESL courses do not require learners to use such intelligent skills until the advanced stages of the course, and concentrate on skills required to respond to the explicit statement of meaning. It is my experience that the earlier L2 learners engage their intellect and imagination as well as their knowledge, memory, and mechanical skills, the more likely it is that they will become truly literate in the foreign language. Poems (as well as songs, short stories, and plays) can, provided they are not too linguistically demanding, provide even elementary learners with opportunities to start developing the so-called 'advanced' skills of comprehension.

**A few provisos** I am not advocating the exclusive use of poetry (or any other form of literature), but suggesting that it can play a valuable role in a balanced programme which could also include the overt teaching of specific structures, functions, and lexical items, and the overt teaching of communication skills.

Notice also the many 'cans' in my descriptions of the potential value of poetry above. I am not claiming that poems always work, or that every member of a group gains during a session in which a poem does work. What I am claiming is that 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 what few EFL texts can achieve, i.e. different but equally valid motivations and responses and the rare engagement of the 'whole person' regardless of the language knowledge, experience, and ability of each learner.

In order for poetry to achieve some of the values listed above, it is important that the focus is not on difficult bits of language but on responses to what has been understood. I have found that pre-teaching difficult items and setting questions on vocabulary and structures can kill a poem as an affective experience and can reinforce the students' negative view of poetry as difficult and alien. I have also found that interesting pre-reading activities which focus on the topic(s) and 'feelings' of the poem can help the learners to take 'knowledge' and experience to the poem and to gain access to it, without worrying about the words and structures they do not fully understand.

**Criteria for the selection of poems** In order to exploit the potential value of poetry to the full, it is important to consider the following criteria when selecting poems for use with a whole class.

**Universal appeal** Very special topics might have great appeal for a few members of a group, but are unlikely to attract the majority. However, such universal topics as youth, old age, marriage, birth, love, education, and friendship have great potential, as most learners have close experience of them.

**Surface simplicity** It is especially important for a mixed ability group that the poems used are linguistically accessible for the weakest members of the group and that there is nothing in the title or opening lines which might frighten off such members of the group.

<i>Potential depth</i>	It is also very important that poems used with mixed ability groups have potential depths of meaning and can thus challenge the brighter members of the group who have no problems in responding to the linguistic surface of the poems.
<i>Affective potential</i>	Poems which express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions, or ideas are usually more 'productive' than those which are gentle, descriptive, or neutral.
<i>Contemporary language</i>	For most 'non-literary' learners it is important that the language of the poems they are asked to read resembles the language they are being asked to learn. I have managed to get classes of schoolchildren to respond positively to Blake, Hopkins, and even Chaucer, but most foreign-language learners are daunted and alienated by poems whose language is remote in time and style from the variety they are learning.
<i>Brevity</i>	Some members of every class will be capable of enjoying long poems, but it is safer to use short poems with a mixed ability class, so as to minimize the risk of 'losing' people.
<i>Potential for illustration</i>	The ideal poem for the mixed ability EFL/ESL class is one which satisfies the criteria outlined above and which lends itself to visual, auditory, or tactile illustration through the use of realia (e.g. slides, films, objects, photographs, music) or specially designed aids (e.g. drawings, sound effects, mime).
<b>Some practical suggestions</b> <i>Pre-reading activities</i>	<p>Learners can be prepared for their experience of a poem through activities which focus their intellect and imagination on the content of the poem, which arouse curiosity and expectations, which help the learners to predict aspects of the poem, which make them want to read the poem, and which ultimately make the poem accessible to all of them. These activities should focus on <i>content</i>, not language, and should ideally involve the learners in interactions which engage them emotionally and intellectually.</p> <p>Activities which can achieve this include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>—discussing controversial topics related to the theme of the poem;</li> <li>—predicting the poem's content from drawings, photographs, realia, sounds, etc.;</li> <li>—listening to or reading related songs, stories, scenes from plays, anecdotes, etc.;</li> <li>—interpreting a related mime;</li> <li>—reading a poem in the mother tongue which is related in theme;</li> <li>—sampling random lines from the poem;</li> <li>—taking part in simulations designed to give the learners vicarious experience related to the character(s) and themes of the poem.</li> </ul> <p>Activities which <i>cannot</i> achieve the desired emotional or intellectual readiness include pre-teaching difficult vocabulary items, practising structures or functions featured in the poem, and other learning activities which focus the learners' minds on language items and run the risk of suggesting that the poem is a model of language use, rather than an expression of ideas and emotions to react to.</p>

**Reading aids** The most obvious way to help learners to 'read' the poem is to let them listen to a reading of the poem before or while they attempt to read it themselves. This can be done by the teacher reading the poem 'live' after thorough preparation or via a recording of a rehearsed reading. Other aids to accessibility include pictures to look at while reading, images to retain in the mind while reading, sound effects (e.g. waves, the wind, gunfire, etc.) and mood music to listen to while reading.

Presenting the poem line by line on an overhead transparency projector while eliciting predictions about the next line, and presenting the poem in jumbled order for groups to sequence before reading it are other techniques which can make poems more accessible.

**Post-reading activities** The first overt response required of the learners to the poem should be an affective and global one. They should feel free to express their reactions in any way they wish. Obviously at this stage teacher judgement or, even worse, correction could kill the learners' responses and inhibit any subsequent creative follow-up.

The next response to the poem should involve the learners in extended interaction in which they use their interpretation of the poem to inform and stimulate communication activities which will involve them in intelligent use of English. Such activities include:

- painting group interpretations of the poem;
- simulations involving interviews with the poet or with characters from the poem;
- dramatizing the poem;
- producing mime or dance versions of the poem;
- turning the poem into a short story;
- producing mother-tongue versions of the poem from memory;
- turning the poem into a pop song;
- continuing the poem;
- re-writing the poem from a different viewpoint;
- reciting the poem in different ways to give it different interpretations;
- comparing the poem with other texts on the same theme;
- discussing controversial statements about the poem.

Ideally the learners should be able to choose from a number of optional activities. One way I have managed this with a mixed ability class is to set up and label six follow-up activities in different parts of the classroom and let learners go to the one which attracts them and is at an appropriate level.

**Some sample lessons** I present below suggestions of how to use a poem by John Arden with students at elementary–lower intermediate levels, and ideas for using a poem by Wilfred Owen with intermediate–advanced classes.

*Elementary/upper  
elementary/lower  
intermediate*

**Phase 1**

- a** The class is divided into groups, with approximately four learners to a group.
- b** Each group is given photographs of old people and asked to say what they seem to have in common and how they differ from each other.
- c** Each member of the group is invited (not forced) to describe and comment on an old person he or she knows.
- d** Each group sits in a circle and performs an oral chain composition which begins 'Old people . . .' (i.e. one learner contributes the first sentence and

then the members of the circle take it in turns to offer a sentence following on from the previous one).

- e New groups are formed and then each group writes chain compositions, with each member beginning his or her composition, 'Old people are often very ...'.

#### *Phase 2*

- a The teacher tells the class that they are going to listen to a poem by an old lady about herself, and asks each individual to write down five words they expect to meet in the poem.
- b Learners are encouraged to read out their words and explain why they have chosen them.
- c The teacher tells everybody to close their eyes and think of an old lady and then to keep their picture in mind while they listen to the poem.
- d The teacher reads aloud (or plays a recording of) the following poem<sup>1</sup>.

PHINEUS:

I'm an old old lady  
 And I don't have long to live.  
 I am only strong enough to take  
 Not to give. No time left to give.  
 I want to drink, I want to eat,  
 I want my shoes taken off my feet.  
 I want to talk but not to walk  
 Because if I walk, I have to know  
 Where it is I want to go.  
 I want to sleep but not to dream  
 I want to play and win every game  
 To live with love but not to love  
 The world to move but me not move  
 I want I want for ever and ever  
 The world to work, the world to be clever.  
 Leave me be, but don't leave me alone.  
 That's what I want. I'm a big round stone  
 Sitting in the middle of a thunderstorm.  
 There you are: that's true.  
 That's me. Now: you.

*(John Arden)*

- e The learners are encouraged to express their feelings about the old lady in the poem to their neighbours and then to the class.
- f The learners are asked to suggest adjectives describing the old lady and to explain why they have chosen them.

#### *Phase 3*

- a Each learner is given a copy of the poem to read, while the teacher labels areas of the room ready for the follow-up activities.
- b The teacher explains the six options and tells the learners to do the one which appeals to them most.
  - i Practising reciting the poem in two different ways.
  - ii Painting a picture of the old lady.
  - iii Choosing from six photographs of old ladies the one which they feel is the lady in the poem, and then writing a couple of sentences (or lines of

poetry) which they think each of the other five ladies is likely to say about herself.

- iv Pretending to be the son or daughter of the old lady, and writing a letter to her on her birthday.
- v Taking part in a simulation in which the relatives of the old lady decide whether to place her in an old people's home, offer her a room with one of them, or let her continue to live alone.
- vi Accepting the old lady's invitation ('That's me. Now: you.') and writing a poem about themselves.

The learners can do their chosen activity alone, in pairs, or in groups (apart from those doing the simulation) and can change their activity if they find it too difficult, too easy, or not very interesting. It is hoped that each activity will ultimately engage the learners in discussing the poem with each other and/or with the teacher.

#### *Phase 4*

In the following lesson the learners are invited to display or perform the products of their activities (e.g. reciting the poem; talking about their paintings; communicating their decision about the old lady's future), and other learners are encouraged to ask questions and express their reaction. The learners should not be forced to put themselves on public display, but should be guided and encouraged if they want to.

*Intermediate/  
upper intermediate/  
advanced*

#### *Phase 1*

- a Photographs, posters, drawings, and cartoons depicting war as glorious and heroic are displayed (pinned on the walls, passed around, put on the blackboard, distributed to groups, etc., depending on the size and nature of the class and the classroom).
- b The teacher invites discussion (plenary or group) about war films, books, TV programmes, etc. that the learners know, and questions are asked about the view of war portrayed by them.
- c The teacher displays photographs, drawings, etc., depicting the horror and futility of war, and invites the learners to compare the two displays and to comment on the differences in their portrayal of war.
- d The teacher chairs a short, impromptu debate on the motion 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori' (after first translating it into English: 'It is sweet and honourable to die for one's country').

#### *Phase 2*

The teacher tells the class to close their eyes and imagine themselves as soldiers marching along a muddy road during a war ('You are freezing cold, you haven't eaten for ten hours, you are walking through wet snow, you are carrying a rifle and a pack on your back, the night is black but sometimes lit up by lights and gunfire', etc.). The teacher then reads aloud this poem:<sup>2</sup>

*Dulce et Decorum est (by Wilfred Owen)*

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turn our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.



Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And floundering like a man in fire or lime.—  
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.  
 In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*  
*Pro patria mori.*

Alternatively, the teacher can play a recording of the poem which has been produced with sound effects (e.g. wind, gunfire, shells exploding, men screaming, etc.).

Then the learners are asked to imagine that they are Wilfred Owen walking in the mud, and to make statements about what they think about war.

#### *Phase 3*

- a The teacher gives out copies of the poem and the learners are given time to read it.
- b The learners are asked to choose one of the following activities:
  - i *Individual work*  
 Imagine that you are Wilfred Owen, and write letters to two of the following: your wife, your mother, a close friend, a newspaper.
  - ii *Group work*  
 Do both of the following:  
 —Design and paint a poster to advertise the film, 'Dulce et Decorum Est'.  
 —Write page one of the film script for the film, 'Dulce et Decorum Est'.

#### *Phase 4*

- a The learners are encouraged to show their work to each other and to the teacher, if they want to, and to invite suggestions for improvement.
- b The learners are encouraged to pin up the final versions of their work, together with the illustrations from Phase 1, copies of 'Dulce et Decorum Est', and copies of any other war poems in English that they can find. Other classes can then be invited to visit the exhibition and talk about what they see and read.<sup>3</sup>

**Conclusion** Most students have had enjoyable experiences of 'poetry' through songs, but many of them resent and fear poems as irrelevant, boring, and difficult, and see them as models of inappropriate English which can only help them



by teaching them a few new words. However, if poems are selected, 'prepared', and used in the ways I have suggested above, they can break down the barriers and involve the learners in thinking, feeling, and interacting in ways which are conducive to language acquisition. □

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#### **Notes**

- 1 From *The Happy Haven*, first published in *New English Dramatists 4*, by Penguin Books, 1962 (reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Ltd). The 'poem' is in fact an extract from a play, and is far from being great poetry. However, it satisfies most of my criteria for selection as the basis of intelligent communication activities, and has succeeded in gaining the desired affective response and involvement from numerous groups.
- 2 From *Georgian Poetry*, Selected and Introduced by James Reeves, published by Penguin Books in 1962.
- 3 Obviously this poem and this lesson would not be suitable for certain countries and certain types of classes, as it could provoke a negative conflict of

views. However, it can stimulate productive debate and arouse positive feelings in classes in which the topic of war is not politically or religiously sensitive.

#### **The author**

Brian Tomlinson is Director of Studies at Bell College, Saffron Walden, where he is responsible for the teacher training and tertiary courses. He has wide experience as a teacher and teacher trainer and has worked in Nigeria, Zambia, and Vanuatu. He also has considerable experience as a syllabus designer and curriculum developer, and has published numerous articles, coursebooks, and books for teachers.