Poetry as a Means for Critical Thinking and Self-Expression
by Megan Chiusaroli and Brittany Ober

There are a number of perceived drawbacks to using poetry in the ESL classroom. Those drawbacks, however, can easily be overcome, and poetry can in fact be used to promote critical thinking and generate authentic self-expression.

Poetry's first perceived drawback is that students lack interest in the genre; thus, teachers avoid it entirely. While some students do lack interest, poetry "can provide the necessary language practice in a context that is relaxed and pleasurable, where all learners can participate as equals in enjoying the playfulness and power of language" (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2001, p. 804). Many students express pleasant surprise when they finish working with a poem and realize that they have enjoyed the experience.

The second perceived drawback stems from poetry's reputation as inaccessible, deviant language that "departs from linguistic norms" (Lazar, 1993, p. 104). Students can have difficulty encountering metaphorical language, but they can be guided to interpret this type of figurative expression. With careful scaffolding, learners can begin to make sense of, recognize patterns in, and paraphrase excerpts of poems. Activities that focus on critical thinking allow students to access poetry not only on the linguistic level but also on a more emotional level. "Entering a literary text, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation almost no other text can produce. When we read, understand, and interpret a poem we learn language through the expansion of our experience with a larger human reality" (Hess, 2003, p. 20). When working with poetry, a singular learning experience is produced, one that fosters high-level mental processing and leads to genuine communication.

The third perceived drawback is the burden that teachers sometimes place upon themselves to be experts in poetry. Teachers may feel that while they have the skills to teach English, they aren't qualified to teach poetry. When a teacher lets go of the idea of "teaching" poetry, however, and instead approaches the genre as an exploration of language, that teacher "ceases to teach and instead [. . .] becomes a participant and guide who works with his/her students" (Panavelil, 2011, p. 13). The classroom dynamic shifts to a student-centered classroom, and teacher and students work together to interpret the poems and analyze their meanings.

Teacher-Selected Poems: Strategies

When choosing poems, a teacher must consider a variety of factors that include student level, interests, and needs. Most important, teachers should choose a text that allows students to explore some sort of pattern or to accomplish a set task.

For instance, with intermediate students, a teacher can guide students to work through "Sonnet 130" and track Shakespeare's description of his mistress by paraphrasing and then evaluating her physical characteristics (Ober, 2015).

Another useful poem is Wallace Stevens' "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Each "way" of looking is a manageable set of lines that students can sketch and then describe to each other; doing so creates a visual representation of the poem that aids students in explaining their interpretations to each other and leads to lively discussion.

For a higher level (B2-C1), a good activity is to read Frank O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" and compare and contrast it with Mike Goldberg's painting *Sardines,* which inspired the poem. Students can also make inferences based on the text about what kinds of activities O'Hara and Goldberg participated in

and what these activities might have been like; the ideas of the students can be checked with biographical information, perhaps as a follow-up out-of-class assignment.

If a teacher can be creative in her or his approach and set manageable tasks for students that focus on critical thinking, poetry can be integrated usefully and meaningfully into the syllabus.

Student-Selected Poems: Presentations

In this activity, students are asked to bring a poem to class that has special meaning to them after being introduced to the genre of poetry and studying a number of poems together in the classroom. They can choose a poem from their language or any language, but they must bring in an English translation of the poem. If they need an idea for a poem, they are directed to the poetryfoundation.org website.

The teacher makes copies of each student-selected poem for the whole class. One by one, the students take turns giving their poem presentations. The presentations include first reading the poem to the class, with a focus on thought groups; if students have brought a copy of the poem in its original language, they are invited to read first in their language and then in English. Next, they explain what they think the poem means and why they have chosen it. The class discusses each poem and looks for similarities and differences.

Positive outcomes of this project include tremendous classroom bonding; students feel free to express personal struggles that they have experienced through the context of their chosen poem. The activity also generates many opportunities for synthesis, as students compare each poem and identify cross-cultural symbolism and similar themes and messages in the poems. Finally, while sharing their poem, each student also has the opportunity to share a part of his or her language and culture with the class. Students feel proud to share their poems and understand each other's selection. As one student observed upon completion of the project, "I could know poems I didn't know and that gives me the world I haven't known."

Poetry, when used purposefully to promote critical thinking, gives students a sense of pride and accomplishment. In addition, when it is used as a way for students to share a piece of themselves, effective expression of the self takes place.

References

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