

Connecting Students Through Poetry: Easy Ways to Use Poetry in the Language Classroom

by Kate Burrill

Poetry is often neglected by teachers in the language classroom. However, it can be a wonderful resource and a great way to get students to work together and analyze language. Poetry contains universal themes that all students can relate to (Eur, 2000). Poems are also authentic materials that truly give students a sense of the sound and rhythm of a language, particularly when read out loud (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2001). And finally, writing poetry is a non-confrontational way for shy students to take part in class and express themselves (Starz, 1995). I have found the following poetry activities to be successful and adaptable for a variety of levels.

Shape Poem

Level: Beginner and up

Objective: Students will be able to write clear, grammatical sentences about a unified topic.

Procedure:

1. To introduce the shape poem, have the class choose an object in the room, such as a window, or a pencil, or a desk. Work as a class to write sentences about the object they choose. Answer the questions:

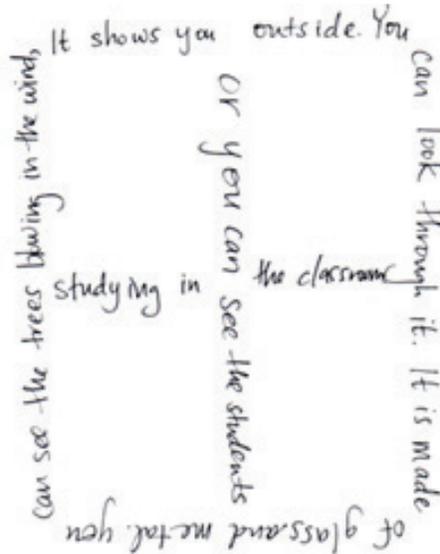
What does it look like? What does it do? What material is it made of? What do we use it for?

For example, if the class chose a window, the sentences might be:

It shows you outside. You can look through it. It is made of glass and metal. You can see the trees blow-

ing in the wind, or you can see the students studying in the classroom.

2. The teacher draws a shape of a window on the board, and writes these sentences over the lines, so that the poem is written in the shape of a window, as shown:



3. The students choose an object that is important to them, and follow the same process: First write the sentences (and have the teacher check or peer-edit), then draw the picture and trace over the lines with the sentences. It may be necessary to revise the poem a little in order for it to fit the picture exactly.

Haiku

Level: Intermediate and up

Objective: Students will be able to write a haiku in collaboration with a partner, following the correct syllable structure.

Procedure:

1. Before class, the teacher posts photos of nature around the room (at least one per two students). The photos will pique students' interest when they come in the classroom.
2. Explain that today, students will be writing a haiku, which is a traditional Japanese style of poetry

about nature. You may wish to give them an example of a traditional Japanese haiku by Basho. Ask your Japanese students to read it, if you have any in your class. You can also ask if your Japanese students are willing to share any haiku they know by heart.

*te wo uteba
kodama ni akuru
natsu no tsuki*

as I clap my hands
with the echoes, it begins:
dawn, the summer moon

3. Show the students how the syllables are ordered: 5 syllables on the first line, 7 syllables on the second line, and 5 again on the third line. This is a good time to review syllables with the class, if necessary. Explain that 5-7-5 is the traditional haiku structure.
4. Put students in pairs, and do a gallery walk around the classroom. Pairs take one photo back to their desks to write a haiku about. Students and the teacher will need to monitor and check that the syllables follow the correct pattern.
5. At the end, students present their haiku to the class. For a less stressful option, students may display their picture and haiku on the wall, and all the students circulate and read each other's.

Poem from your country

Level: Advanced

Objective: Students will build community by presenting a poem from their country, as well as practice intonation through reading a poem.

Procedure:

1. Students research and choose a poem that they like in their language. The teacher may choose to allow students from the same country to work together. Students must answer the following questions in their presentation:

- a. **The author of the poem:** When she/he lived, any interesting facts about his/her life;
- b. **The title of the poem:** What is the original title, in your language? What is the translated title?
- c. **What the poem means:** Find a translation of the poem online, or translate the poem into English yourself. If your translation is not perfect, that is OK. However, do NOT use an automatic translator! This will make the poem completely impossible to understand.
- d. **Why you chose this poem:** Explain why this poem was the one you selected.

2. An appropriate presentation length is five to six minutes. The teacher

may grade on how well the students have answered the questions in the prompt.

Conclusion

These activities are only a few of the possible ways to use poetry in your classroom. If you have been avoiding poetry because it is boring or opaque, I think you will find that there are, in fact, many ways to teach it in approachable, collaborative, and fun ways.

References

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