

LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH POETRY FOR EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract: Poetry can help students become more sensitive to language. However, in an EFL situation students may object to learning poetry. Thus, English teacher should know how to use poetry in their teaching. The teacher should also let the EFL learners not feel worry about understanding poetry because not all poems are difficult. Moreover, what matter most is learning English through poem and not to learn about the poem itself. In short, it is suggested for EFL English teachers to have the learners explore some poems and write ones. Poetry gives abundant language exposures that improve students' language sensitivity and students' creativity in using their English.

Keywords: poetry, English, EFL

Abstrak: Puisi dapat membantu siswa untuk bisa menjadi lebih sensitif terhadap bahasa, Tetapi di konteks Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing, siswa mungkin menolak mempelajari puisi. Guru Bahasa Inggris harus tahu bagaimana menggunakan puisi dikelasnya. Sesungguhnya pelajar bahasa Inggris juga tidak usah merasa khawatir untuk mempelajari puisi. Tidak semua puisi sulit dipahami. Yang terpenting adalah tujuannya belajar bahasa Inggris melalui puisi bukan belajar tentang puisi itu sendiri. Secara singkat, sangat penting bagi guru bahasa Inggris untuk melibatkan siswa dalam belajar bahasa Inggris lewat membaca dan menulis puisi. Puisi bisa meningkatkan sensitivitas terhadap bahasa dan juga kreatifitas siswa dalam menggunakan bahasa Inggrisnya.

Kata-kata kunci : puisi, bahasa inggris, bahasa inggris sebagai bahasa asing

Poetry has been taken as a difficult subject for most students, especially students of EFL. This view keeps this type of linguistic expression out of typical EFL classroom. In fact, in EFL situation in which students have little English exposure, students may say "who needs poetry?" as a frequent objection that poetry ought not to be studied at all.

While many language teachers agree that poetry promotes language acquisition, they will also add that poetic concepts and cultural assumptions are usually difficult for EFL learners to understand (Finch, 2003).

Some students who have no problem understanding and enjoying prose may find understanding poetry difficult. This might be true for difficult poems, but not for simple poems that can be understood at one reading. So EFL learners, should not feel worry about understanding poetry. Not all poems are difficult of course, and some can be understood and enjoyed on first seeing. These easily understandable poems will motivate the students to improve their English, especially through its varied structure of its form, vocabulary, pronunciation, contextual meaning and

grammar. Moreover, because of its rhythm and word choice, poetry is a good authentic material for teaching some productive skill such as communicative speaking activities, pronunciation, and writing activities. Also, the varied structure of its form makes poems appropriate tools for teaching basic concepts of grammar. Poems are, after all, authentic texts. This is a great motivator. Poems are often rich in cultural references, and they present a wide range of learning opportunities.

This paper aims at introducing a new perspective of using poetry to enhance English language learning especially in EFL classrooms. Teachers need to think that the aim is to teach English through poetry, not to teach poetry itself; so they don't need to hesitate to use poetry in their class only because they are not literature experts. English teachers, who I believe understand how literature plays an important role in language learning, should try to introduce poetry in their English class, especially the activity of poetry reading and poetry writing, which is followed by the discussion on its meaning and form either individually or collaboratively.

INTRODUCING POETRY AT ANY GRADE LEVELS

As it has been mentioned previously, poetry is an authentic material that gives

plenty of advantages especially for EFL learners who have little English exposure. One advantage is that poetry can be introduced as a part of English instruction at any grade level. Thus, teachers need to change their view of poems as a difficult language learning tool. The most important consideration is choosing the poem which is appropriate with the level of the language learner and with the targeted language point. The following is the instruction recommended by Hollowell (1999) in using poetry at any grade level. This instruction is presented by Hollowell without example, but I provide an illustration poem to be taught for each level. Teachers of EFL can use the following poems with some highlights on difficult words or expression, which need to be explained for their students.

Teaching Pre-School and Kindergarten Students.

For these children, poems are beneficial in teaching beginning English skills. Choose poems that are short and then display the poem on the overhead projector or write it and post in the room. To teach one or two letters of the alphabet per week, have the children circle words that begin with the targeted letter. The following example is a poem that can be used to teach alphabet (vowel letter) "a" and "o". Please notice the underlined letters

SONG: HARK, HARK!
Hark; hark!
Bow-wow
 The watch-dogs bark!
Bow-wow
Hark, hark! I hear
 The strain of strutting chanticleer
 Cry, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"
 William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

In this poem there are difficult word, such as *hark* and difficult expression such as *The strain of strutting chanticleer*.

Teacher should make these words clear for EFL kindergarten students such as in Indonesia. The word *hark* is synonymous

with *listen*. Furthermore, the expression *The strain of strutting chanticleer* may literally mean “a very loud cry of a rooster”

Teaching Elementary School Students.

Teachers can use poetry as a great tool for reinforcing the basic structure of English. For example, whenever you are teaching parts of speech like verbs,

adjectives, nouns and pronouns, choose poems that have plenty of examples of these in the stanzas. Then have the children circle or highlight all nouns or all verbs that they can find. This is a great alternative to the traditional worksheets which usually have the children find these elements in random sentences. The following example is a poem for teaching adjectives

ALL DAY I HEAR
all day I hear the noise of water
 Making moan
Sad as the sea-bird is, when going
 Forth alone
He hears the winds cry to the waters’
 Monotone
The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing
 Where I go
I hear the noise of many waters
 Far below
All day, all night, I hear them flowing
 To and Fro

James Joyce (1882-1941)

Before using this poem in their teaching, teachers of EFL should explain about what the word *moan* mean. Literally, this word means “the sound of pain.” This explanation may help students to relate its meaning with the next phrase “sad as the sea bird is”

Teaching Junior High School Students.

For these students, poems can be used effectively to teach skills that move beyond the basic concepts of English such as phrasing. When teaching prepositional phrases or noun phrase, choose poems that have examples of these, and display them on the overhead projector. You can have

selected students come up to highlight the targeted phrase. By the time students advance to these grades, they may not want to get up in front of peers; so it is also acceptable to call on volunteers to just tell you the answer. It is beneficial to have copies of the poem to give to each student and have them circle or underline the phrases because the children who may be poor readers will probably never volunteer to give an oral answer. This way, you can check papers later to be sure everyone understands what you taught. For example, the following poem can be used to teach prepositional phrases

. THE EAGLE
He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The underlined phrases in this poem are prepositional phrases. This poem may be a challenge for Indonesian Junior high school, but teacher still can use it with some highlights on the difficult words. Teachers of EFL can explain some difficult words such as *crooked*, *azure*, *thunderbolt* before teaching prepositional phrases. The word *crooked* here means “sharply curved, bent or twisted”. Students can imagine how crooked hands may look like. Then, the word *azure* literally means “deep blue colour like the colour of blue sky”. This word is actually an imagery of sight which gives a vivid description about “the blue world” where the eagle stands. And the last, the word *thunderbolt* means “a flash of lightning.” By explaining these words first, students can understand the poem better; and afterward it can be used as a tool to teach prepositional phrases.

Teaching Senior High School Students.

When students are in senior high school, they will begin English instruction in critical and descriptive writing. Poems provide great examples of this genre to illustrate this type of writing. Choose poems that are highly illustrative, so students can find descriptive phrases. Choose rhyming poems that demonstrate a variety of writing rhythms such as assonance and alliteration. These will help students when they begin writing essays that require such elements. For critical writing, choose poems that are highly conceptual and call for students to reflect and then write or talk about what the verses mean to them. The following poem can be used to lead the students into a piece of critical writing, comparing humans and animals.

THE GRAY SQUIRREL

Like a small gray
coffeepot
sits the squirrel.

He is not
all he should be,
kills by dozens
trees, and eats
his red-brown cousins
The keeper, on the
other hand
,who shot him, is
a Christian, and
loves his enemies,
which shows
the squirrel was not
one of those.
By Humbert Wolfe (1885-1940)

This poem is comparing between humans and animals. The subject includes the habit of the gray squirrel who kills trees to survive and the act of the keeper, who is Christian in shooting it. However, the theme or its generalized content is about animals follow the law of the jungle and destroy-but people are worse because they destroy while pretending to follow a higher law. In short, the theme is the hypocrisy of human being. By introducing this poem, students may be lead to write an essay about the hypocrisy of human being.

ENHANCING SKILLS AND LEARNING FUNCTION THROUGH POETRY

Poetry can enhance productive skills as well as promote some positive learning function. Smart (2005) found that some productive skills can be enhanced through poetry such as communicative speaking activities, pronunciation, and writing activities. Moreover Holmes & Moulton (2001) stated that poems can promote a number of positive learning functions such as awareness of grammar, awareness of phrase and sentence structure, learning from interactive modeling, learning from

collaborative group, learning from cooperative group, exercising inductive thinking, exercising sensory stimuli, learning by sharing their works and learning to use their expression in their works. The following are the brief descriptions of how poetry can do its works

The Productive Skills that Can Be Enhanced through Poetry *Communicative speaking skill*

Poetry can be a tool for communicative speaking activities. To do this, the teacher should provide plenty of pre-reading activities before doing any productive work, so that the students are adequately prepared; for instance, playing some background music to create the atmosphere, showing some pictures to introduce the topic, and then getting students to think about their personal knowledge or experience which relates to this topic.

The students are then encouraged by the teacher to talk about the poem, first with a partner and then in small groups, perhaps coming together as a class at the end to share ideas. The teacher acts as a learning assistant who monitors and feeds in ideas and vocabulary, gives brief feedback on language used and notes any language problems to be dealt with at a later date.

The teacher may prepare worksheets for pre-reading speaking activities which might involve a quiz, a questionnaire, sentence stems to be completed and discussed, statements to be ranked and discussed, and so on.

Students might predict endings to verses, the whole poem, or events occurring after the end of the poem. Afterwards, the students could talk about their personal response to the poem, discuss the characters and theme, or debate the moral issues. Role plays work well, interviewing a partner, or even dramatizing the poem and making a video. Students could compare poems on

related topics, with different groups working on different poems and then regrouping to pool their ideas.

Pronunciation Skill

Learning about pronunciation is very important especially for EFL students who don't have much English exposure from the environment. Rehearsing and performing a poem is a great way to teach pronunciation. The teacher may read the poem to them or play a recording of a native speaker reading a poem. And the students can identify the stresses and pauses.

The emphasis can also be put on teaching the pronunciation of language chunks that can be found in the poem. The class can take a chunk (a line or two) at a time, and one half of the class claps out the rhythm while the other half beats time, and then they swap over.

Some variations in performing the poem work the best and motivate learning especially for young learners. The teacher can recite while the students mumble rhythmically, and then as their confidence grows they could chant in a whisper, a shout, or show a range of emotion. The teacher will find that this tends to work best when it is improvised.

Another exercise is doing intensive phoneme work centred on the rhyming patterns in the poem. Some poems are crying out to be exploited in this way. I elicit possible rhymes before revealing the poet's choice, and discuss which suggestions have exactly the same sound and which don't, leading to a minimal pair activity.

Writing Skill

A poem can spark off some wonderful creative writing. Students can add more lines or stanzas individually or in pairs or groups. They can write a letter to a character in the poem, write about what

happened before the beginning or after the ending of the poem and so on.

Students may do a summarizing work. Longer poems can be summarized in fifty words. And this stimulates the students to use their creative writing skill

Students could also use the poem as a starting point and model for a writing topic.

For example a poem by Robert Frost “The Road Not Taken” can be used to lead the students to write about what important decision they have made about their life. This poem can be used for EFL students with advanced level

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

*Two roads diverged in a yellow road,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I -
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference. by Robert Frost*

To do this activity, the following procedures can be done:

- a. First, it can be started from the title. Ask the students what it means, but don't put too much detail here, because it will ruin the later enjoyment.
- b. Ask the students what kind of important decision in life they could think of, and ask them whether they can always decide something important easily
- c. Read the first stanza and ask the students to think about what the words “undergrowth” and “diverged” mean.

“Undergrowth” here means anything growing beneath the trees in a forest. In the poem this word suggests the two roads lead in to the depth of the forest. And “diverged” mean separate or going to different direction

- d. Ask them to read the whole poem.
- e. Ask the class about the meaning of the phrases in the poem such as the phrase “wanted wear” and “telling with sigh” The students may feel difficult to understand this. Encourage class discussion. Help the students to conclude

- at the end of the discussion that the phrase “wanted wear” may mean the road is attractive to walk on and the phrase “telling with a sigh” means the speaker regret that he can only explore one of the two roads.
- f. Encourage the students to write about an important decision in their lives. What decision did they take? Why? Do they feel it was the right decision? Do they have regret? Why?

The Positive Learning Function that Can Be Enhanced through Poetry *Grammar and Vocabulary*

The teacher can involve students in interactive and rewarding grammar drill by designing pattern poems which focus on a particular aspect of grammar or syntax. For example, to teach adjectives, linking verbs and nouns, the teacher may use pattern poems. Pattern poems can be used with all levels and ages of learners, and are particularly effective in the EFL classroom, since they can be adapted to teaching purposes such as grammar and sentence structure. The *patterns* in these poems usually consist of grammatical items, metrical frameworks, phrases, or sentence structures, though they can also include acronyms, alphabetical sequencing and other types of patterning. Despite their simple, uncomplicated nature, pattern poems reinforce, and even teach, multiple

language skills while challenging students to share their vision of the world around them in a nonthreatening way. Holmes & Moulton (2001) believes that through writing simple pattern poems, learners can:

- play with words and see what fits because the burden of discovering a proper format for a poem is removed;
- create a polished piece of writing in a relatively short period, thereby experiencing “instant gratification”;
- rehearse correct spelling;
- use familiar vocabulary;
- discover new vocabulary while using the dictionary or thesaurus to find words that serve their ideas;
- practice specific language structures such as phrases, word order, and verb tense;
- develop confidence in their ability to share ideas in writing;
- nurture creativity by giving their imaginations free reign;
- cultivate logical and sequential thinking skills through storytelling;
- refine summarizing skills.

The followings are example of how pattern poems can help learners use particular language structure and vocabulary. In this example, the teacher provides patterns for each line of the poem. There are 6 lines to be made by the students following the provided patterns.

| Pattern | Poem |
|---|---|
| Line 1 : Noun | <i>Love</i> |
| Line 2 : Same noun + is or are + adjective | <i>Love is sweet</i> |
| Line 3 : Same noun + is or are + adjective 1, adjective 2 | <i>Love is sweet, marvelous</i> |
| Line 4 : Is or are + adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3 | <i>Is sweet, marvelous, fantastic,</i> |
| Line 5 : Adjective 1, adjective 2, adjective 3, adjective 4 | <i>sweet, marvelous, fantastic, genuine.</i> |
| Line 6 : New related noun/ | <i>Mother's love</i> |
| | <i>Poem</i> |
| | <i>Poem is beautiful,</i> |
| | <i>Poem is beautiful, inspiring</i> |
| | <i>Is beautiful, inspiring, fabulous</i> |
| | <i>Beautiful, inspiring, fabulous, valuable</i> |
| | <i>Pattern poem</i> |

As the students wrote their poems, the teacher monitored their work and pointed out problems with the structure and subject-verb agreement. Hussein (2004) observed that many students had problems with adjectives and used nouns to modify the subject. A typical mistake would be : *She is success*.

Pattern poem can also be used to introduce vocabulary. Finch (2003) stated that a familiar item of vocabulary can be used as an acronym, in order to promote a number of teaching aims (spelling, vocabulary, dictionary usage). Holmes and Moulton (2001, p.15) give an illustration how acrostics poem can be used to teach

spelling, vocabulary and dictionary usage. Based on the illustration given by Holmes & Moulton (2001), I also provide an illustration of acrostics poem that basically can work to teach spelling, vocabulary and dictionary usage. The central acronym (see table 1) uses single word-association to describe the concept of *mother*, while the acronym to its left uses an *adj + noun* structure. The third acronym in this figure constructs two complete sentences, in which the required letters appear at the front of every three or four words:

Table 1. Acrostics Poem (teaching points: spelling, vocabulary, dictionary usage)

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| Mild tone Open mind Trusty eyes Hearty voice Extravagant outfit Reliable person | Mindful Open Tolerant Heartwarming Enjoyable Real | Mine is humorous Open, and likes Talking. She knows How to make Everyone laughs with her Ridiculous jokes |
|--|--|--|

Awareness of phrase and sentence structure

The teacher can focus students' attention on an aspect of language structure

and invite students to make poem using that structure. The following is an example (Holmes & Moulton, 2001 p.128).

| Pattern | Poem |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Line 1 : specific phrase or clause | <i>Floating in the air</i> |
| Line 2: same type of phrase or clause | <i>Gliding through the garden</i> |
| Line 3: same type of phrase or clause | <i>Drinking from the flowers</i> |
| Line 4: same type of phrase or clause | <i>Dancing on the leaves</i> |
| Line 5: same type of phrase or clause | <i>Landing on my finger</i> |
| Line 6: Subject of phrase or clauses | <i>Butterflies are free</i> |

Interactive modeling (working on a poem with the teacher).

Students can learn from observation and interaction with others in their immediate environment as well as learning writing strategies from writing with the teacher. For

example a structural construction–focusing on an adjective, noun, verb, verb phrase and prepositional phrase–is provided by the teacher and the students are encouraged to make composition conforming to this framework. See the following example.

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Teacher's example | Student's composition |
| Hot chocolate steaming, | Cold ice freezing |
| Rich aroma rising, | Sweet aroma rising |
| White marshmallows melting, | White milk leaking |
| Cold hands grasping, | Warm hands hoping |
| Big cup waiting, | Round bowl waiting |
| Cocoa in winter tastes good | Ice cream in summer tastes good |

Collaborative group.

Students can work on a piece of writing together. The teacher may explain a particular language structure and ask the students to write their own poem in a group. Through collaborative group students employ problem-solving skill and can

practice decision-making language (agreeing, disagreeing, suggesting, confirming, error-correction, etc) in the joint composition of a poem. The following is an example of the composed poem from a pattern provided (Holmes and Moulton, 2001)

| <u>The composed poem</u> | <u>The pattern</u> |
|--|---|
| I am a studious girl who loves to read. | I am (2 special characteristics). |
| I wonder if I could someday be an author, too. | I wonder (something you wonder about). |
| I hear the voices of characters talking as I read. | I hear (imaginary sound). |
| I see what they look like and what they are doing. | I see (imaginary sight). |
| I want to create my own stories for others to read. | I want (actual desire). |
| I am a studious girl who likes to read. | I am (first line repeated) |
| I understand that I may not be a successful writer | I understand (something you know is true) |
| I say that success is in my hand and I must pursue it. | I say (something you believe in) |
| I dream of the joy my writing could give others. | I dream (something you dream about) |
| I try to read and write as often as I can. | I try (something you make an effort about). |
| I hope my dream can come true. | I hope (something you hope for). |
| I am a studious girl who loves to read. | I am (first line repeated) |

Cooperative group.

Cooperation occurs when students help each other with individually written poems. Thus, the poems made may be passed around inside groups for suggestion and even peer-correction (spelling, agreement with the target form). Helping a peer to polish up his poem can be very helpful in promoting comprehension of the learning content.

themselves (Problem solving). For example the sentence "I am a studious girl who loves to read" (see the above poem), this line can be used to explain the structural pattern of simple present tense or relative clause using "who". The students can also be asked to figure out it by asking them to see the pattern and try to make one example of their own.

Inductive thinking

Structural patterns can be explained to students or they can figure out by

Sensory stimulation

Sensory stimuli (video, picture, sound, clips, or textile) help the creative process. The teacher may use various media to stimulate learning. Video or background

sound that is supporting poems can motivate students to learn. The relax atmosphere created by these sensory stimulations reduce students' anxiety.

Sharing

Students' poem can be shared in the classroom (displays, poetry reading, calendar, greeting cards, cassette tapes). Students can be very creative when they are asked to display and share what they make. Asking students to make a calendar or a greeting card with their personal poem may enhance their interest in English. Also, the opportunity to share motivates them to learn from each other. The teacher can encourage them to use a dictionary along the process of making their poem.

Expression.

Students can use the target language to express feelings that have meaning and relevance to them, instead of being restricted by grammatical inadequacy to non-personal, syntactical construction. For example, students may be encouraged to write about their part-time job and what they feel about it. To do this the teacher may provide one poem (I provide my own poem here) which can motivate the students to express their feelings:

SLUGGISH SUNDAY

Sunday it is

When the entire orders vanish

All the silent cherish

me, without piles of plates of rubbish

Oh just Sunday it is

When my mind feels so sluggish

and clean as Sunday table is

Away from the pencil's wish

To write pizza, spaghetti and fish

(By Lokita Purnamika Utami: 2009)

With the example given by the teacher, students will try to make their own poem. Remind them that they can be as creative as possible and encourage them to use words

that they never use. Here, the teacher can be an assistant for the students to see whether they already use the word appropriately as required by the context.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS TO BE CONCERNED

However useful poems are, the teacher still needs to take several considerations into account to make them meaningful for learning. *First*, the teacher might need to spend a bit of time finding a poem that links thematically with her scheme of work and that is suitable with the proficiency level of language learners. *Second*, the teacher has to avoid using poems that are too long, too archaic or too obscure, or something that can't be used to muster any enthusiasm for or that the students may not respond to. This is important to be noted since EFL students need to be encouraged to love the poem, and this will be possible if the poems are easy to understand and capable of promoting enthusiasm. *Third*, the teacher needs to explain the pedagogical rationale and the aims of activities very clearly since for students who have disliked studying literature in their own language may need extra motivation. *Fourth*, EFL teachers are recommended to use poetry as warmers or fillers, and as the catalyst for many different activities. By considering these factors they can design a meaningful learning for their students.

CONCLUSION

Poetry, which is seemingly a difficult learning tool for EFL learners, in fact offers some advantages. *First*, it can be flexibly used at any grade level. *Second*, it enhances students' productive skills such as communicative speaking activities, pronunciation, and writing activities. And *third*, it promotes some positive learning functions such as grammar, awareness of

phrase and sentence structure, interactive modeling, collaborative group, cooperative group inductive thinking, sensory stimulation, sharing and expression

Poetry has a wide range and variety of uses of English. It provides cultural insights and forms a basis of discussion. Poems are often thought-provoking and help teachers to break away from routine exercises; they are often humorous and add a motivational atmosphere to a classroom activity. Students may find a poem a welcome, and sometimes inspirational, change from a course book. Poems can be involving, motivating and memorable, and they can supplement and enrich just about any lesson. Poetry also provides good practice in developing correct pronunciation and intonation. Rhythms and rhyming patterns not only develop technical language skills; they add fun and vigour to the process!

Moreover, by using poems, the teacher can create lots of opportunities for personalization. This means that the students have plenty to say, and the communication is genuine because they are talking about their own experiences or expression (self-voicing). And teachers don't need to be formally trained in

literature to bring poetry to their English class.

Above all, it is worth taking the risk using poems as a part of instructional materials because poems can foster a love of English since they are so versatile.

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