

## Poetry in the University Classroom

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This article outlines the development of the Special Topics Poetry course which has been implemented as part of the English Language Program. Students enrolled in this course read poems, learn about literary elements, and develop English skills in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Typical lessons are divided into three main parts: pre-reading, reading, and postreading. This article will outline how activities for each of these stages have been implemented through the use of specific examples of poems that have been included in various iterations of the course.

**Key Words** : Poetry, Literature, Reading, Materials Development

### Introduction

Students in the School of Policy (SPS) studies are encouraged to develop in a number of areas during their undergraduate studies: increasing understanding of complex problems, participating in field work opportunities, gaining intercultural awareness, and developing presentation and communication skills (School of Policy Studies, n.d.). The basis of the English Language Program (ELP) is to study English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and to develop a range of other areas, including critical thinking skills, study strategies, and professional competencies (English Language Program, 2019). Within the ELP, the Special Topics course is a unique opportunity for students to learn about a topic in English. The course goals include conducting research and engaging in small group discussion, as well as practicing the skills learned in their other English Communication (EC) classes: reading, listening, seminar, presentation, and writing (English Language Program, 2019). With this in mind, in this content-based course, students not only learn about a topic but also work on improving English language skills. When designing the Special Topics course, these programmatic goals and course objectives provide a foundation for the course development.

This article focuses on a Special Topics course about poetry. The poems selected for use in the course were chosen based on various factors: length, language, appropriateness, and availability. In addition, an attempt has been made to select poems which reflect a diverse array of experiences and that are potentially meaningful and relevant to students. Because students have different preferences, they “should be introduced to the wide range of literary texts suited to their individual needs and interests” (Yilmaz, 2012). Some of the poems’ themes are related to the broad areas of academic focus within SPS: language and culture, the environment, the city, society, and mass communication (School of Policy Studies, n.d.). In addition, other poems are related to general areas of personal interest, with music and movies being popular topics with university students in Japan (Kitzman, 2016).

Although the focus of the course is poetry, this does not mean that literary texts are the only text type that students read. Poetry and informational articles are both integral parts of the course because “literary texts and other text types are best exploited in complementary fashion than in isolation” (Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2011). In preparation for each class, students read and take notes on a nonfiction article. These articles convey biographical information

about the poets, preview literary elements used in the poems, and provide necessary background information. For instance, the article which students read prior to reading *Field Poem* (Soto, 1999) includes information about the author. It also defines simile, an important literary element used in the poem, and it gives general information about farm workers in the United States, the theme of the poem. After reading the article, students answer several questions to check their comprehension. They also write short answers to discussion questions and write definitions for the literary terms explained in the article. This preliminary assignment provides a familiar starting point for students as reading nonfiction articles and completing written homework are integral parts of EC courses. The articles for the Special Topics were created specifically for the course and include language that students have encountered in other EC reading and writing classes (i.e. paragraph structure, transition words, sentence stems, vocabulary). The article information is reviewed in class before reading the poems.

In this class, students read poems, learn about literary elements, and develop English language skills. Students read poems in class, and lessons are divided into three main stages: prereading, reading, and postreading. The purpose of this structure is to assist students with understanding background information or unfamiliar language, and to provide opportunities for students to use the four skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening). This article will outline how prereading, reading, and postreading activities have been used with a selection of poems that have been included in various iterations of the EC Special Topics Poetry course.

### Prereading

Students participate in prereading activities which are designed “to arouse the learners’ curiosity and involve them in the poem’s themes” (Collie & Slater, 2001). When introducing poems, there are many choices available. Asking students to predict the poem’s content from the title, to discuss pictures related to the poem, or to give personal reactions about the themes are several options for inciting interest (Lazar, 1993). Listening to information about the historical or cultural context, discussing the

author, or researching information about the poem’s themes are all ways to build learners’ background knowledge (Lazar, 1993). The two prereading activities described here involve looking at visual arts to encourage interest in the poem and obtaining additional background or cultural information.

Using pictures, paintings, or other types of visual arts as the basis for short opening discussions is a way to review the author information and to stimulate interest in the poem and its themes. The poem titled *The Great Figure* (Williams, 1921) draws readers into a scene unfolding on a city street as a firetruck races through the night. It can be introduced through the painting titled *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold* (Demuth, 1928), which is based on the poem. After looking at the painting for a few minutes, students look for similarities between the author’s biographical information and the painting (Metropolitan Museum, n.d.). Students may notice that variations of the author’s name are included in the poem; furthermore, they may be able to predict the theme of the poem from looking at the painting. For example, students may notice that the number five is featured prominently or that the artist uses perspective, and these provide some clues about the poem.

Another poem and painting pair is *Remember* (Harjo, 1983), a poem which emphasizes a deep connection between people and the natural world, and the painting *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Peak* (Bierstadt, 1863), which depicts humans, animals, and plants coexisting peacefully. Students discuss their responses to the following questions: What do you see in the painting? What did you notice first? What did you notice second? How does Harjo feel about the interconnectedness of things? (Academy of American Poets, n.d.). In this way, paintings are used to both review the author information and to cultivate interest in the poem.

An additional type of pre-reading activity is to explore background or cultural information related to the poem. This can be done by reading printed materials, such as articles or graphs, or by listening to audio or video files, such as interviews or lectures. *Field Poem* (Soto, 1999) is a short poem featuring farm workers in the United States. In order to understand the poem more deeply, learning basic informa-

tion about the author's life and about farm workers in the United States is necessary. For auditory input, students can listen to an interview with the author, who spent some of his formative years working in the fields, and complete a note taking sheet while listening. To learn more about the general situation, students can read an infographic highlighting statistics about the challenges farm workers in the United States face. Both of these will better equip students for reading activities that require them to read the poem and identify the themes.

### Reading

To begin the reading stage, students listen to the poem being read aloud by the teacher, or they listen to an online audio file of the author reading the poem. Hearing how the poem sounds is especially relevant for appreciating spoken word poetry, a type of poetry that is performed in front of others and is characterized by its use of everyday language. After listening to a model reading, students take turns reading the poem to their partner or doing a choral reading (i.e. a group of students recites the poem in unison). However, during this stage of the lesson, "It is important to let students approach a piece of literature the first time without giving them any specific task other than to simply read it." (Clanfield & Duncan, 2004). This means that the first reading activity should simply be to read and enjoy the poem, and because of this, time needs to be allotted for students to read the poem several times.

The primary purposes of the reading activities outlined here are to reread the poem and further understand the language that the author has used. Poetry poses some additional challenges for students, ranging from figurative language to unfamiliar syntax to low frequency vocabulary, so these activities are designed to provide scaffolding for students in these areas. "When designing materials to use with a poem, teachers should first analyze what is unusual or distinctive about the language in the poem. The materials or tasks for students should be devised around these unusual features, since this will increase both their understanding of the poem and their knowledge of the language in general" (Lazar, 1993). The type of specific language support that students need will vary according to the poem and

the group of learners. Examples of reading activities focused on vocabulary from two poems are discussed next.

### Vocabulary and Language

*Famous* (Nye, 1995) invites readers to reflect on their conceptualization of what it means to be famous, and this reading activity focuses on vocabulary and close analysis of particular phrases. "Famous" is defined as "widely known" (Merriam Webster, 2019) and this definition is the one that students have likely learned. However, in the poem, "famous" does not conform to this meaning, but rather it is used to mean "close" or "familiar." This meaning can be inferred from the poem, for example: "the river is famous to the fish" or "The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds / watching him from the birdhouse." If students are unable to infer the word's meaning independently, providing alternatives for them to choose from may be more appropriate. Like the poem *Famous*, the *The Great Figure* features a word with multiple meanings. By first reviewing the definition of the word "figure" that students have likely learned, a shape or form, students are prepared to guess another meaning from context. In this poem, "figure" refers to a number, and furthermore, "the great figure" refers to the number five on the side of the firetruck. By first establishing the known meaning of the words, students will be prepared to consider other meanings of words.

In addition to words with multiple meanings, some other vocabulary items in the poems may be unfamiliar to students. The body of the poems can be analyzed using the Vocabulary Profiler on the Compleat Lexical Tutor website (<https://www.lextutor.ca/vp/eng/>). Using this site can be useful for checking the vocabulary level of texts and for creating lists of words to study from a text (Sevier, 2004). The results for poems used in this course show that many of the words used are from the General Service List, or the first 2,000 words, which are the most commonly used words in English. For the words above this level, various strategies can be used to attend to the meaning of unfamiliar words: guessing the meaning from context, using a dictionary, or asking a question about the word.

However, for some words, it might be more effective for an explanation that goes beyond the word level. In *Famous*, two words, *shuffling* and *sticky*, can be problematic for students because they are used to create images of people. The phrase “shuffling men” evokes an image of the elderly and “sticky children” of children who have eaten candy; both of these descriptions bring to mind images of people encountered in everyday life. Preparing vocabulary activities for challenging vocabulary words will help students to read and understand the poem.

After resolving vocabulary word meanings, students’ attention is directed to the author’s use of figurative language in the poem. In *The Great Figure*, one distinctive feature is the author’s use of onomatopoeia (i.e. a word that resembles the thing it describes). These add volume and convey sensory imagery in the poem. This is seen in the following lines: “to gong clangs / siren howls / and wheels rumbling / through the dark city”. In other poems, different literary devices, such as simile and metaphor, are used. For example, the poem *Remember* (1983) contains metaphors. “They are alive poems” makes a connection between plants, trees, animals and poems; “we are earth” compares people with earth. When reading this poem, students find the metaphors, identify the two things being compared, and discuss how these are used to construct meaning in the poem.

### Content and Themes

Reading a poem does not just involve reading and understanding individual words and phrases on the page, however, and students will also need the opportunity to figure out the overall content and themes of the poems that they read. Although some groups of students are able to answer open-ended questions, some groups of students need scaffolding in order to do so. Instead of lecturing about the poem, activities that give students further opportunities to use language skills are implemented. One option to help students unlock a poem’s meaning is to use a series of comprehension questions that guide students to discover the meaning of the poem on their own. If students are unsure of the meaning or hesitate to express their ideas, providing alternative answer

choices and asking students to choose the most likely interpretation is one way to proceed.

Another option for helping students to discover meaning is to introduce annotation as a tool for reading poetry. While reading, students highlight key features of the poem: deviant uses of punctuation or capitalization, repetition of words or phrases, or other points they notice or have studied. They also mark key words in the poem, for instance people, places, or seasonal references, and they mark literary elements in the poem as well. Even if students do not understand the poem entirely, they can still annotate the poem by noting words they want to look up in the dictionary or questions they want to ask about the poem. A variation of this activity outlined in Collie & Slater (2001) is to distribute a copy of the poem which has already been annotated by the teacher or a previous student. These annotations are used as a basis to understand the poem and encourage discussion. After being provided with models for annotation, students try to annotate other poems individually or with a partner.

### Postreading

Postreading activities are follow-up activities that give students opportunities to create something new based on the knowledge they have gained from reading the poem. Lazar (1993) suggests transforming poetry into a different genre, reading other poems by the same author, writing poems following the same style as the original, or discussing ideas from the poem. The activities outlined below focus on speaking and writing skills.

In a postreading activity for *Famous* (Nye, 1995), the focus is on discussion skills and thinking critically about the concept of fame. To begin this stage of a lesson, students discuss the question: Can you give an example of people or things that are famous? (Gui, Hillis, Bartoszynska, & Zampino, 2018). Common answers include famous people (e.g. athletes, musicians, influencers, or celebrities) or well-known tourist sites in Japan (e.g. *Kinkakuji* or *Kiyomizudera*). To expand on the activity, further discussion on the topic of fame, using some of the discussion questions from EC seminar courses, are implemented. What are the benefits of being famous?

What are the problems with being famous? Should people try to become famous? Which is better, being famous to many people or famous among those close to you? Drawing on students' previous knowledge of the concept of fame and the alternative meaning of famous in the poem, students consolidate knowledge gained from the poem and practice their discussion skills.

As a follow-up activity to reading *The Great Figure* (Williams, 1921), students read other short works by the author, such as *The Red Wheelbarrow* (Williams, 1923) or *This is Just to Say* (Williams, 1934). Then students write a written reflection, a paragraph about the similarities and differences between these poems by the same author. Although students are free to choose the main idea, concrete details and examples from the poems should be included to support their ideas. Alternatively, for a creative writing assignment, *The Great Figure* provides an interesting frame for reflecting on the urban environment and an opportunity to think about the variety of everyday events which occur there. Students brainstorm and then choose one of these common, yet memorable moments. Using what they have learned about figurative language or sensory imagery, students write a poem to convey their chosen scene through words. These writing assignments can be read aloud in small groups in a subsequent class, with listening students taking notes on their classmates' work.

A goal for the further development of this course is to incorporate additional listening materials. An option for this would be to develop what Collie and Slater (2001) refer to as "listening-in" activities in which two people discuss a piece of literature. For example, a listening scenario could be a conversation between two people, one who has read the poem and one who has not, summarizing and giving personal reactions to the poem. Another possible scenario could be two students who have read the poem discussing their experiences reading it and sharing their ideas and interpretations of it. As students listen, they can complete notetaking sheets with details from the audio, and then compare these answers with a partner. Aside from providing listening and notetaking practice, these types of recordings could be used as models for discussing a

poem with a partner.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, poetry can be used to develop English language skills as well as knowledge about literature as a content area. After considering department and program level goals and objectives, as well as student needs and interests, materials for the Special Topics poetry course were selected and designed. Although the primary focus of the course is reading poems, students read a combination of informational and literary texts. Balancing reading, writing, speaking, and listening focused activities has been a factor in the course development. This provides students with a range of opportunities to improve their English language skills.

A general structure with three stages, prereading, reading, and postreading, has been implemented in the course. Activities in the prereading stage are designed to preview the content of the poems and motivate students to read them. During the reading stage, students read the poem thoroughly before directing their attention to the vocabulary and language used in the poem, and the overall content and theme of the poem. Finally, during the postreading stage, students generate original material based on the poems by having discussions about ideas and opinions or writing their own original paragraphs or poems. After completing this course, students should be more familiar with poetry in English.

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## RESOURCES

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