

Using poems to teach English. *English Language Teaching*. 15(2), 29 – 45.

Andrew Finch
Kyungpook National University

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Abstract

The reading and writing of poetry, classified as a literary activity, has helped to keep this form of linguistic expression out of the typical EFL classroom. While many teachers agree that poetry promotes language acquisition, they will also add that poetic concepts and cultural assumptions are usually too difficult for EFL learners to take on. While this might be true of poetry as a reading activity, however, the use of poetry in the writing class can provide an effective and collaborative means of language learning and of personal expression. Simple forms can give students a framework for expressing ideas that are meaningful to them, without the constraints of grammatical accuracy. Picture poems, pattern poems and haiku, thus offer ways of making English a means of personal expression, creativity and development, serving to reduce affective barriers in a nonthreatening learning environment. Popular song scripts can also facilitate awareness of pronunciation, intonation and sentence flow, in addition to containing contemporary cultural commentary. This paper therefore suggests that a broader perspective on the use of poetry in the language classroom can lead to meaningful and successful language learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

The traditional view of poetry as one of the most sophisticated forms of literary and linguistic expression, makes it by definition inaccessible to all but the most advanced language learners. Even then, the wealth of literary allusions, historical references and cultural assumptions typically found in the works of great poets, can limit comprehension greatly for the native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) alike. As Brindley (1980) points out:

Poems often deal with geographical or social settings alien to the students' experience. Perhaps the greatest barrier to understanding poetry, however, is its

elliptical, metaphorical, and highly allusive language. Poetry, from this perspective (i.e. as a high-level, individual reading activity), has little to offer the EFL classroom, especially at middle school and high school level. (Brindley, 1980, p. 1)

However, if we take a broader view of the term, we find that: “a poem is a piece of writing in which the words are chosen for their beauty and sound and are carefully arranged, often in short lines which rhyme” (*Collins Cobuild, 2001*). This definition, which contains no reference to comprehension of difficult metaphorical, cultural, or ethical allusions, and nothing about grammatical correctness, metrical structure, sentence structure or logical sequencing of ideas, opens the doors to pop-songs, haiku, pattern poems, picture poems, nursery rhymes and folk-songs, all of which can be viewed as poetry. By stressing enjoyment, and presenting poetry “through media and methods that provide maximum student involvement and interest” (Brindley, 1980, p. 1), not only can language learning be facilitated, but learners at all levels can use the medium of poetry to express themselves in the target language.

A further assumption regarding the studying and writing of poetry is that it is an individual activity. This paper, however, takes an interactive, collaborative approach, and describes how poems can be used to promote cooperation and communication as well as individual expression, in the EFL classroom. By inviting students to be “in the poem” (Moore, 2002, p. 44), actively reading poems in pairs or other small groupings, and creating ideas together, poetry can become an integral part of the EFL classroom and can be a means of investigating issues relevant to the students’ backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes.

II. PICTURE POEMS

Picture poems offer a visual perspective on the arrangement of words, and are therefore an effective means of encouraging learners to interact with the target vocabulary. By using non-grammatical structures, students can play with the language, producing visual and verbal output.

pictorial expression through repetition. Poem 4 takes this concept further, playing with meaning by randomly alternating three words (*memory, clouds, perception*) in a shape suggestive of one of them (*clouds*), before making final comments. In its rejection of punctuation, this poem leaves the reader free to make personal (subjective) associations and interpretations.

Figure 2 (below) shows another type of picture poem, in which the words outline the object being described. As with previous examples, these words can be sentences or collections of word-associations, devoid of grammatical structure. Because of this, students can experience immediate success in terms of expressing themselves in English (improved self-esteem), and stress or anxiety can be reduced (reduction of affective filters). These poems thus encourage students to interact and experiment with the target language in a non-threatening learning environment, and can be displayed on the classroom walls, providing continuous validation of the students' efforts and abilities.

FIGURE 2

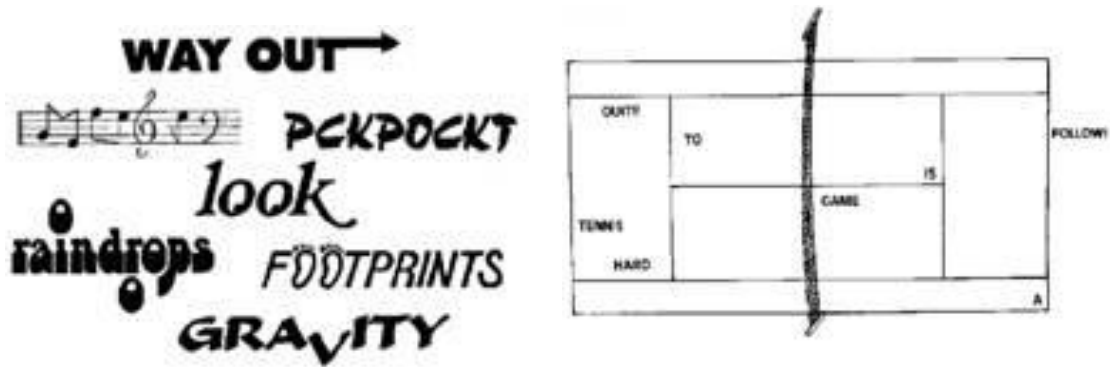
Picture poems (2): the words are arranged to outline a shape.



Figure 3 (below) (Hadfield & Hadfield 1997) shows two pictographic, or “concrete” poems. This type of picture poem suggests actions rather than shapes, combining meaning and appearance. Thus, the letter *T* in *WAY OUT* (figure 3) indicates the direction for exiting, the word *PICKPOCKET* (figure 3) has had two letters stolen from it, *MUSIC* is depicted through musical notation, and the force of *GRAVITY* pulls the *V* below the other letters. The right-hand pictograph in figure 3 is even more explicit in its combination of meaning and action, as the words of the sentence (*Tennis is quite a hard game to follow*) bounce back and forth over the tennis net, in the manner of a game of tennis.

FIGURE 3

Pictographic poems: the words are arranged to suggest actions (Hadfield & Hadfield, 1997, p. 9, section 16).



Picture poems thus encourage creativity and experimentation with the target language, helping students to view the use of English as a pleasurable and creative experience. As mentioned earlier, the process of composition can be enhanced through small group work, with students brainstorming, suggesting, agreeing, assisting, proof-reading and editing draft poems. As long as students are on-task while performing these activities, then use of the L1 is appropriate when necessary, since the final product (which will be shared with other groups, displayed on the classroom walls, and entered into the class newspaper) will be in the target language. If students are able to communicate and collaborate in English, however, then process and product will benefit greatly from this authentic use of English.

III. HAIKU

Haiku promote brainstorming and collaborative expression, and facilitate expression without the burden of sentence structure. Students are encouraged to see words and short phrases as self-sufficient, and to play with the sounds of the words themselves, while juxtaposing simple concepts. Figure 4 offers some student examples from Hadfield & Hadfield (1997):

FIGURE 4

Example haikus (Adapted from Hadfield & Hadfield, 1997, p. 17).

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Summer grasses - All that remains Of soldier's visions. | 2. Spring: A hill without a name Veiled in morning mist. | 3. Clouds now and then Giving men relief From moon-viewing. |
| 4. The winds of autumn Blow: yet still green The chestnut husks. | 5. You say one word And lips are chilled By autumn's wind. | 6. A flash of lightning: Into the gloom Goes the heron's cry. |

As can be seen, the expression is immediate, visual, and profound, and students are able to develop confidence and creativity. Vocabulary, spelling and dictionary skills can also be focused on, as students search for words describing concepts and impressions.

This form of contemplative poetry is a suitable medium of expression for EFL students, since its structure is simple and flexible. The traditional 3 lines and 17 syllables (5, 7 and 5) can be altered at will (cf. figure 4), to allow the depiction of a moment, sensation, or impression of a fact of nature. Haiku often present pairs of contrasting images, followed by an observation, thus evoking mood and emotion, but leaving commentary to the reader. This snapshot-like perspective encourages experimentation and appreciation of the beauty of words and ideas, allowing EFL students to make deeply personal statements in the target language, unrestricted by syntax and grammar.

IV. 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 (adjectives, adverbs, verbs, etc., cf. appendix B), metrical frameworks, phrases (appendix A), or sentence structures, though they can also include acronyms (figure 5), alphabetical sequencing (appendix C) 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. 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. (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 3)

Figure 5 (below) illustrates the above-mentioned factors in application, when a familiar item of vocabulary (*friend*) is used as an acronym, in order to promote a number of teaching aims (spelling, vocabulary, dictionary usage). The central acronym (figure 5) uses single word-association to describe the concept of *friend*, 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:

FIGURE 5

Acrostic poem: Teaching points: Spelling, Vocabulary, Dictionary usage (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 15).

| | | |
|---------------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| Furry face | Funny | Few people are |
| Red hair | Real | Real friends |
| Intelligent eyes | Interesting | In my life. I |
| Ears that hear everything | Enjoyable | Enjoy seeing true, not |
| Nose that sniffs | Nice | New friends every |
| Dog of my dreams | Delightful | Day |

As with other poetic forms, pattern poems can promote a number of positive learning functions (cf. Holmes & Moulton, 2001, pp. 5-7):

- 1.*Grammar:* Teachers can involve students in interactive and rewarding grammar drills by designing pattern poems which focus on a particular aspect of grammar or syntax (cf. appendix B).
- 2.*Awareness of phrase and sentence structure:* Teachers can focus student attention on an aspect of linguistic structure (cf. appendix A) and invite students to make poems using that structure.
- 3.*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. In appendix A (for example), a structure focusing on noun/verb/prepositional phrase construction is provided by the teacher, and students are encouraged to make compositions conforming to this framework.

- 4. *Collaborative groups*: Groups collaborate when they work on the same piece of writing together (small groups). In appendix B, for example, the teaching aim is quite complex: the order of adjectives in a noun-phrase. Rather than indulging in lengthy explanations and rote-learning of rules, however, the teacher has presented and illustrated the learning content above an example poem, encouraging students to make their own poems using this grammatical infrastructure. Working in groups, students can now employ problem-solving skills to interpret the examples, and can practice decision-making language (agreeing, disagreeing, suggesting, confirming, error-correction, etc.) in the joint composition of a poem (appendix B: *Our adjective placement poem*).
- 5. *Cooperative groups*: Cooperation occurs when students help each other with individually written poems. Thus, pattern-poems may be passed around inside groups for suggestions and even peer-correction (spelling, agreement with the target form, etc.). Helping a peer to polish up his/her poem can be very helpful in promoting comprehension of the learning content.
- 6. *Inductive thinking*: Structural patterns can be explained to students, or they can figure out the patterns themselves (problem-solving).
- 7. *Sensory stimulation*: Sensory stimuli (pictures, sounds, video clips, textiles, etc.) help the creative process.
- 8. *Sharing*: Students' poems can be shared in the classroom (displays, poetry readings, exhibitions, cassette tapes, greeting cards, calendars, etc.).
- 9. *Expression*: Students can use the target language to express feelings and ideas that have meaning and relevance for them, instead of being restricted (by grammatical inadequacy) to non-personal, syntactical constructions. Thus, appendix D shows an "I am" poem, in which the writer learns/practices/reviews sentences, subordinate clauses, relative clauses and metaphors, to express personal characteristics (curiosity, sounds, sights, desires beliefs, dreams, etc.). Structure, in this highly personal poem, is provided by the combination of *I* with a verb at the beginning of every line, and by the final repetition of line 1 at the end. However, there is no restriction on the lengths of the lines, and students are free to explore their visions of themselves.

V. POP-SONG SCRIPTS

Pop songs are popular in the EFL classroom for a number of reasons, though they are rarely regarded as poetic texts, or as models of creative English composition. Rather than using them solely for listening comprehension and cloze-tests, however, this paper suggests that

pop-songs and their lyrics are valuable sources of contemporary cultural information and models of authentic language use. If we look at *Yesterday* by Paul McCartney (1965), for example, we have an initial three-line rhyming stanza, with the first word providing the rhyme sound (*day*) and being repeated at the end of the third line:

Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away
Now it looks as though they're here to stay
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

This pattern is repeated in the second stanza, with (*suddenly*) being used to rhyme with *be*, and *me*:

Suddenly, I'm not half the man I used to be,
There's a shadow hanging over me.
Oh, yesterday came suddenly.

The two-line refrain which follows modifies the pattern, inserting internal rhymes of *go/know* and *wrong/long* but keeping the (*day*) rhyme at the end of each line:

Why she had to go I don't know she wouldn't say.
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.

Stanza three then returns to the original pattern and same *day/play/away* rhyme:

Yesterday, love was such an easy game to play.
Now I need a place to hide away.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

Finally, the refrain and the third stanza are repeated in their entirety:

Why she had to go I don't know she wouldn't say.
I said something wrong, now I long for yesterday.
Yesterday, love was such an easy game to play.
Now I need a place to hide away.
Oh, I believe in yesterday.

We thus have a simple metrical and rhyming pattern for a poem about lost love (a popular topic for middle school and high school students), and students can work on this template [1] in groups, designing their own version of this pop-song which they know so well. The meter of this poem is simple and consistent and has many instances in which nine short syllables follow each other without break: *all my troubles seemed so far away*. This is significant in terms of pronunciation practice, since students who mimic the artists when singing this song, will reproduce the correct phrasal structure of the sentence, and will not be tempted to enunciate the Konglish [2] version, in which a neutral vowel sound is added to syllables ending with a consonant: *troublesuh seemeduh so faruh awayuh*. Thus, a visit to the local singing room (no-reh-bang) can be beneficial in terms of acquiring correct appreciation of sentence-level pronunciation and intonation rules, in contrast to a discrete-item study of minimal pairs, which takes no account of sentence flow and the relative stress of words as they appear in different combinations.

American Pie, by Don McLean (known also for Madonna's later version) is an example of a pop-song which brings the culture of the target language to the students. In addition to rhyming lines (*ago/how, smile/while, chance/dance, shiver/deliver, bride/inside/died*), this song tells of the writer's reactions to an important event in the history of American pop-culture: the death of three pop-music icons (Buddy Holly, The Big Bopper, and Ritchie Valens) on February 3rd, 1959, which he links with the demise of the American Dream. This song can thus be studied by students for its cultural relevance in terms of the emergence of pop in the USA, and in terms of the disillusion about American institutions and politicians, which became more prominent during the Viet-Nam War years. This contemporary poetic work can thus promote awareness of sentence-level pronunciation (*That music used to make me smile*) and pop-culture, while providing a template for student-directed, collaborative composition of a similar poem. It could even spark the creation of a poem about Korean pop-culture.

A long, long time ago
I can still remember how
That music used to make me smile.
And I knew if I had my chance
That I could make those people dance
And maybe they'd be happy for a while.
But February made me shiver
With every paper I'd deliver.
Bad news on the doorstep



I couldn't take one more step.
I can't remember if I cried
When I read about his widowed bride.
But something touched me deep inside
The day the music died.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to indicate how poems and poetry-related activities might enhance English language learning at middle school and high-school level. It is suggested that a focus on the beauty of the words of the target language and on their student-directed use in non-grammatical as well as in grammatical contexts, can promote meaningful and relevant expression of personal meanings, in addition to focusing on particular aspects of structure and syntax. A great depth of poetic expression can be found in pop-song scripts, which voice the hopes and fears of artists who are often seen as role-models by secondary students. By using these scripts as linguistic and affective templates, language students can interact with the target language, while exploring issues which have deep meaning to them.

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APPENDIX A

Phrase poem: Teaching points: Verb phrases, Verb, noun, and prepositional phrases, Clauses, Parallel structure. (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 128).

Examples:

| | |
|--|---|
| Floating in the air, Gliding through the garden, Drinking from the flowers, Dancing on the leaves, Landing on my finger, Butterflies are free | Hot chocolate steaming, Rich aroma rising, White marshmallows melting, Cold hands grasping, Big cup waiting, Cocoa in winter tastes good. |
|--|---|

Pattern:

Line 1: Specific phrase or clause

Line 2: Same type of phrase or clause

Line 3: Same type of phrase or clause

Line 4: Same type of phrase or clause

Line 5: Same type of phrase or clause

Line 6: Subject of phrases or clauses.

APPENDIX B

Adjective placement poem: Teaching points: Adjectives, Order of adjectives in a noun phrase, Vocabulary (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 25).

| | | | | | | | |
|--|------------------------|------------------------|---|----|----|----|----|
| 1.determiners | 5.general description | 9.color | | | | | |
| 2.possessive words | 6.size, height, length | 10.origin | | | | | |
| 3.ordinal numbers | 7.shape | 11.nouns as adjectives | | | | | |
| 4.cardinal numbers | 8.age, temperature | 12.head noun | | | | | |
| 1 | 5 | 6 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| a beautiful big old brown Italian leather sofa | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 8 | 11 | 12 | |
| our first three pleasant warm winter days | | | | | | | |
| 1 | 5 | 7 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | |
| a valuable oval gold French picture frame | | | | | | | |

Example:

We're taking a trip to Egypt,
And we're taking along our favorite things:
My fun, rectangular, old blue, Japanese Gameboy,
My big, sharp-beaked, old, singing, white and yellow cockatoo,
My soft, playful, short, small-eared, female black lab,
And we'll have fun!

Our adjective placement poem

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

APPENDIX C

Alphabet poem. Teaching points: Letters of the alphabet, parts of speech, phrases, sentence structure, dictionary usage. (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 38).

What I did last summer

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>Argued about my haircut Baked cookies with mum Called my friends twice a day Daydreamed a lot E-mailed my friends Floated on my air-mattress in the pool Gave all my old clothes away Hiked to the top of the mountain Insisted on having my way Judged my dad when I had no right Knew I was wrong Licked ice-cream cones daily Made tons of new friends at the lake</p> | <p>Navigated the internet Ordered pizza for the girl I baby-sat Pasted pictures in my scrapbook Questioned my parents' rules Rested, rested, and rested Scratched my mosquito bites Told Paul I love him Urged my dad to give Paul a chance Vowed to be true forever Wondered why I was missing school X'd boxes on college application Yeared for something to do Zigzagged around the yard</p> |
|---|---|

APPENDIX D

“I am” poem. Teaching points: Sentences, Subordinate clauses, Relative clauses, Metaphors. (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 112).

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

[1] Shostakovich’s first symphony uses the structure of a Haydn symphony as a template.

[2] Konglish = Korean-English