



Active Poetry

Early in my teaching career, my students eagerly prepared for each monthly visit of Miss Johnson, a county supervisor, who made sure they could all recite the poem she had assigned for memorization the month before. As rigid as this requirement seems today, the students accepted the importance of poetry and looked forward to showing off their recitation skills. As an added bonus, the selections the children memorized undoubtedly stayed with them for life. I can still recite "This is the House That Jack Built" from my own schooldays, and I suspect that the others who were in my class can, too.

When I was growing up, children were taught to read mostly by memorization, going through the same story or poem again and again until they knew every word. Over time, the sight-word method of learning to read lost favour to more analytical approaches. Today we know much more about children's learning styles and how they learn to read. Nevertheless, memorization still has its place-for learning the multiplication tables, how to spell certain words, and favourite poems.

For me, each poem that I have learned is like a familiar friend I associate it with certain events and experiences in my life, and I relive those times by recalling the poem. I am fortunate to have been introduced early in life to the rhythm and rhyme of poetry, which has been a continuing source of pleasure.

There is no better way to begin the English lesson than by reading a poem aloud. Whether recited by an adult or by a child, poetry offers children a unique way to explore and enjoy language. Talking about the subject of and the meaning of words in a poem, repeating favourite lines of a poem, or memorizing a poem allows a child to claim language as his or her own. The lilting quality of poetry makes it easy to remember, and the satisfaction of learning a poem by heart can be rewarding in itself.

Introducing a Poem: The Four R's

Poetry is foremost an auditory experience, so it is particularly well suited to elementary readers. Here is the sequence of steps to introducing a poem to young children.

(1) Read Aloud

Until a word is in a child's listening vocabulary, it cannot become part of his or her reading vocabulary. To begin to recognize and enjoy poetry, children need to hear it spoken. Read the poem aloud so that they can hear the rhythm, the correct phrasing, and the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. (Before reading the poem aloud, preview with the children any possible new words either by reciting them, pointing them out on the page, or writing them on the chalkboard.)

(2) Read Along

Once the class has heard the poem read aloud a few times, the children can try reading along in unison, imitating what they have heard. The technique, called choral reading, allows all levels of readers to participate without embarrassment.

(3) Read Alone

After several rounds of listening to the poem read aloud and then reading aloud in unison, the children can try to read the poem aloud by themselves. Be sure to repeat the first two steps enough times so that children can be successful. If a child has difficulty with a word, supply the word immediately to avoid interrupting the flow of language.

(4) Recite

There are various approaches to memorizing a poem. Here are three of the best:

- Read the entire poem over and over (looking away from the page as phrases and sentences are remembered) until the entire poem can be recited.
- Read and learn one line at a time, adding another line and repeating it with the lines already learned.
- Use meaning to remember a poem. If the poem is about the four seasons, first learn the sequence in which the seasons are presented. If it has action, first learn the sequence of the action.

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