



## Alternative texts for the language classroom: poems

**Judith Lamie**, a Lecturer in the English for International Students Unit at the University of Birmingham, urges teachers to use poetry in class, and suggests how.

The use of alternative texts and materials in the language classroom is by no means a new idea, but it rarely appears to be carried over into practice. This is most frequently due not to a lack of ability on the teacher's part, but to a shortage of time: time to prepare materials, and especially time to think of interesting and innovative ideas.

Using texts such as poems for students to work on is familiar in reading and spoken language extension in English schools, where the techniques are referred to as DARTS - Direct Activities Relating to Texts. They lend themselves well to EFL learners as they offer interest, stimulate motivation and can provide considerable opportunity for language activity.

Here are ten ideas of what can be done with poems in the classroom. They are followed by some recommended anthologies that would work particularly well with EFL students of 11 years and above:

1. As a way of introducing poetry to the students, a short poem is read at the end of each session. Nothing further is done with the poem. The objective is to have students become familiar with the rhythm and sounds of poems without the pressure of having either to produce their own, or to answer a barrage of comprehension questions.
2. A display board is set aside for poems that have been previously read at the end of the class, to allow the students to go and read them at their leisure - the students' own may follow later, but only with their consent.
3. Students listen to taped readings of poems, and read them at the same time. The joint stimulus of sound and sight can help build up a sense of what a poem actually is.
4. Students work out ways of presenting poems in dramatic form. Some poems contain people; in groups, the students decide who they want to be and act out the poem. Mini demonstrations are given to the rest of the class, or other students in the school if the students are eager to do so.
5. Students select photographs from newspapers or magazines to illustrate a poem. This might be developed into a collage display.
6. Narrative poems (e.g. ballads) are presented in a frieze. Each student is allocated a section of the poem and illustrates it - with lines from the text included in the picture if possible.
7. Students make a poem poster. Individually, in pairs or in groups, they read the poem and try to condense its message into one picture. The pictures could then be presented and displayed to the rest of the class, and a prose summary underneath could accompany it as well as the original poem. Displaying them not only acknowledges the work the students have done, but also makes a positive contribution to the overall language environment.
8. Selected words are blanked out of poems and the students speculate about what the words might be. This activity could be done once with a poem, or in stages. Because some poems rhyme, they give opportunities for developing phonic and phonological knowledge. You begin by asking students for as many words as they can think of to rhyme with a number of words displayed on the board: in this way a considerable bank of rhyming words is presented. Then copies of the poem, doctored with regular deletions, are produced. The words originally displayed on the board can be the deleted end words and the students' task is to select from the bank the most appropriate rhyming word to fill in the deletion. They can check their responses by reading the original.
9. The students rework the poem in a different language genre - as a newspaper item, for instance.



10. Poems are cut up and the students asked to reorganise them. If sentence structure is under the microscope, a couple of lines cut up into smaller segments is sufficient. If the extraction of meaning from larger language units is required, then the entire poem can be cut up into either individual lines, or groups of lines, depending on the level of difficulty required. The most intensive learning section of the activity comes with the follow-up discussion which, of course, asks the students to explain and justify their revised order. This gives opportunities for raising questions about structures, word orders and sentence shapes. The students then test out their decisions against the original and they may even prefer their own.

The list of possibilities is endless. Students redraft poems as stories for telling, and write them as stories for reading. They can destroy originals by changing key words to words of opposite meaning, thus turning love poems into dislike poems, endearments into insults; they can change pronouns to turn poems about girls into poems about boys - and vice versa. As has already been said, the only limit is the teacher's imagination and I have no doubt that there are plenty of EFL teachers who can provide many more examples than this. But even if it does look like a risk to carry a poetry book into the language classroom, it is in my experience a risk worth taking.

### **Anthologies**

*Poems for Over 10 year-aids:* chosen by Kit Wright (Puffin Books 1984)

*Poems for 9 year-aids and Under:* chosen by Kit Wright (Puffin Books 1984)

*You Tell Me:* Roger McGough and Michael Rosen (Puffin Books 1981)

*The Kingfisher Book of Children's Poetry:* selected by Michael Rosen (Kingfisher 1985)

*The Metaphysical Poets:* selected and edited by Helen Gardner (Penguin 1984)

*Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis (1987), and Serious Concerns (1992):* Wendy Cope (Faber & Faber)

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