



There once was a teacher from...

Simon Gill, who works for the British Council in Slovakia as an in-service teacher trainer with the Central Institute for Methodology, Bratislava, has found limericks a rich source of language work with his students.

While poetry has made a number of appearances in recent issues of MET, I cannot recall seeing anything on the use of limericks in language teaching. This is a pity, as I have found them ideal for the classroom for a number of reasons: their A-A-B-B-A rhyme structure; their 3-3-2-2-3 rhythm; their name-the-character, explain-the-situation, develop-it, give-the-punchline plot; their brevity; their liveliness, and their sheer fun. I would like to offer you some of the ways in which I've used them with my students.

Word stress

The strong rhythm of a limerick makes it an ideal way to sensitise learners to this aspect of English.

I began with a brief description of word stress, with some examples in simple sentences. Then I gave the students the words of the limerick below. They listened as I read it aloud and then, in pairs, discussed how many stressed syllables they had heard. I then read it a second time. We discussed it once more and established the 3-3-2-2-3 pattern. I read it again, more than once if necessary, and they marked the stressed syllables. After checking, we read it aloud, beating out the rhythm as we went, first chorally, then individually. Subsequent work involved them working out the stressed syllables in other limericks for themselves, after which we moved on to stress in normal speech.

There WAS a young WOman called LORna,
Who GOT herself LOCKED in the SAUna.
When they Opened the DOOR
She was LORna no MORE,
Just a SMALL pool of SWEAT in the CORner.

Word order

This is a major problem for many learners. I began by giving my students a jumbled first line and inviting them to put it into correct English in as many ways as they could. From: *Pat / cat / once / a / called / was / there* we got:

Once there was a cat called Pat
There was a cat called Pat once
There was once a cat called Pat

There once was a cat called Pat
There was a cat once, called Pat
A cat called Pat there was once

I put all of these on the board, without comment, and we discussed them. Then I gave the students the rest of the limerick below, also with each line jumbled, and they worked out which of the possible correct versions was the right one, using the rhythm to guide them:

There once was a cat called Pat.
Who grew most incredibly fat.
She sat on the floor
And ate more and more,
And that was the end of that.

A similar, but more advanced and much harder exercise, was a kind of 'complete cloze', in which each word was represented by a blank and all the words were given in random order. Some help, for example supplying the last word of each line, was sometimes necessary, but the students said they found the exercise challenging and useful.

Articles

Another problem area! The approach I favour is best described as 'a little and often', and limericks, with their lightness and shortness are ideal for quick practice.



I gave the learners two or three limericks with blanks where there should (or might) be an article, as in the example, and asked them to fill them in.

There was young lady of Niger.

Who rode with smile on tiger.

They returned from ride

With lady inside.

And smile on face of tiger.

(Key: 5 x the, 3 x a / an, 1 x 0)

They completed the limericks in pairs or groups and then we discussed the way articles were used in them. Sometimes, as here, I gave them guidance; later on, I didn't.

Writing

We began by looking at a limerick with the final words missing. I chose the one below with the cultural background of my students in mind; composer, Johann and waltz were all clues as to his identity, and there is a strong collocational hint at the identity of his other companion from the word *cat*.

There was a composer called

Who lived with a cat and a

Said Johann one

I'm glad they can

So they all did a waltz round the

Working together, the students were all able to come up with Strauss, mouse and house, but I was happy to see them produce not only the day and stay of the original but also *day / play, night / fight, week / speak, and time / rhyme*.

The next phase involved group brainstorming of rhyming words, which were then Shared with the whole class. Finally, I asked the students to produce their own limericks (See below). This can be done either individually or collaboratively, in class or for homework. Another possibility is a school-wide limerick competition.

Conclusion

The above activities by no means exhaust the potential of limericks in the classroom. They can be

exploited for grammar work - they are, for example, rich mines for instances of the simple past - and vocabulary exercises; they are ideal material for short dictation exercises of all types'; they can form the basis of roleplays, interviews, and compositions; they can be read aloud, recited, chanted, sung - and, no doubt, much more besides. Why not give them a try?

Three limericks by Simon Gill's students;

There was a pretty young woman
Who wanted no man but Paul Newman.
She refused all the boys,
Long years waiting his choice,
Now she lewdly stares even at old men.

Martina Juskova

There once was a pig called Jerry,
Who had a nice girl friend called Mary.
They went to Spain
To drink champagne,
And now they have a pigling called Ferry.

Dagmar Capcuchova

There once was a girl called Daisy,
Whose brother was terribly lazy.
His two big dogs
Liked to eat frogs
And they all were said to be crazy.

Sarka Bromkova

References

1 see Davis, P. & Rinvoluceri, R. (' 988) Dictation, CUP.

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