

Poetry Writing in the EFL Classroom

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This paper discusses the use of poetry writing in the EFL classroom as a low-stress and motivational tool in helping students to generate language. It offers a rationale for the use of poetry writing and nine types of exercises that you can try out in your own classroom.

1. Introduction

A few months ago, I had the opportunity to see Alan Maley speaking at an international language teaching conference in Malaysia in which he talked about writing simple poetry in the EFL classroom. As this type of creative writing activity may be of interest to other teachers and is not generally featured in teaching journals, I decided to share and expand on Alan's insights for teachers who think their students could benefit from this kind of activity as a supplement to their regular language work.

2. Differences between Expository Writing and Creative Writing

There are clear differences between expository writing and creative writing. For example, a technical paper from an academic journal is immediately noticeably different to a poem in an anthology, but it is useful to consider the differences between expository writing and creative writing more closely in order to identify the type of writing and underlying rationale which apply to each of these genres. *Expository writing* can be defined as a type of writing in which the purpose is to inform, explain, describe, or define the author's subject to the reader.

In contrast, *creative writing* is considered to be any writing, fiction, poetry, or non-fiction, that goes outside the bounds of normal professional, journalistic, academic, and technical forms of literature.

Table 1. A comparison of expository and creative writing

Expository Writing	Creative Writing
Instrumental	Aesthetic
Facts	Imagination
External control	Internal discipline
Conventions	Stretching rules
Logical	Intuitive
Analytical	Associative
Impersonal	Personal
Thinking mode	Feeling mode (plus thinking)
Appeal to intellect	Intellect to sense
Avoidance of ambiguity	Creation of Multiple meanings

3. Why Use Creative Writing in EFL Classes

But why should we use creative writing in EFL? In contrast to expository writing, creative writing involves a more playful engagement with language, a close and accurate observation of everyday life, learning how to use figurative language, becoming more sensitive to sound in language, and careful thought about the communicative effects of language on the listener or reader. In the Japanese EFL situation where students can often be unmotivated, the attention to the affective element of language can be useful in engaging their attention. In addition, Japanese students often tend to write for the teacher, rather than for a wider audience. Poetry reading can easily lead to the formation of a classroom discourse community where students get used to listening to or reading each other's writing. This discourse community can then be used to share students' expository writing and is likely to lead to more effective peer correction and feedback, thus simultaneously reducing the load on the teacher and

providing a more genuine audience for each student's writing.

Alan Maley lists a few important reasons which reiterate some of the same themes:

- Creative writing can be a powerful force for language development since students actively search for the language to express the concepts in their minds.
- Creative writing fosters a willingness to play with language and a higher tolerance of ambiguity which are both commonly accepted features of the good language learner.
- It can lead to self-discovery through exploration and risk-taking and this can lead to positive affect (emotional responses) towards English and learning in general. Creative writing can also lead to increased motivation, confidence, and self-esteem. This is best achieved by ensuring that student work is always published in some form. One very effective way of raising standards is to publish the work in a booklet at the end of the semester. These booklets can be shared with family or friends, or with future students. Other possibilities include publishing the work in a blog or on a video site.
- Employing creativity in the classroom draws on affect and recent neurological research highlights the importance of affect in engaging cognition and memory. In particular, the release of the neuro-transmitter, dopamine, occurs when the student anticipates something with excitement or feels a sense of achievement, and dopamine has been shown to be beneficial for formation of long-term memory.
- Becoming a creative writer means that the student is also becoming a more creative reader which can lead to language gains in all four skills and can easily become evident in students' expository writing.

4. Poetry Writing Exercises

While many people think of poetry as something that is difficult and would be challenging for non-native speakers, Alan Maley provided some excellent exercises to show how even low-level learners of English can easily get into L2 creativity through simple poetry exercises. In this way, they can express emotions and incidents from their own lives in simple English which helps them to gain a better understanding of the communication resources at their disposal as well as providing strong motivation for further study. Below, I have described his exercises with my own simple poetry examples.

Exercise 1

Write a two line poem with two words in each line. The teacher should supply the first word of each line.

Goodbye city

Hello beach

Exercise 2: Acrostics

An acrostic presents a word vertically on a page and each letter of the word begins a new sentence. For example, if the word was RAIN, the poem could be:

Running home

After school

In a dream

Noisy teacher is gone

The students can write the poem on the topic of the textbook lesson. It is usually a good idea for the teacher to supply the word.

Exercise 3

Write a poem where each line has a particular grammatical form. This can be very useful for practicing target language structures in a fun and memorable way. For example, the structure could be three words in the form NOUN – VERB – ADVERB. To make the exercise more interesting and challenging, the teacher can specify that each of the words must begin with the same letter.

Sandwiches sit silently
Crows consider cunningly
Mice meander merrily
Cats crawl carnivorously

Exercise 4: Stems

As an introduction to a textbook reading, stem poems can be a great way to fire up the imagination. For example, if the topic of the reading was loneliness among the elderly, the exercise could be:

Finish the stem “Loneliness is …” in four different ways to write a poem.

Loneliness is my father’s voice
Loneliness is my mother’s grave
Loneliness is a word she left
Loneliness is the last thing she gave

Other good examples of stems are “I remember …”, “If I could …”, and “I would like …”.

Exercise 5: Haiku

A haiku is a Japanese syllabic poem. The first line has five syllables. The second line has seven syllables. The third line has five syllables. You can give students the first two lines.

Finish this haiku.

Waiting in darkness
An aged blind man sitting

...

*Waiting in darkness
An aged blind man sitting
Where is my whiskey?*

Exercise 7: Mining a Text

Give a text to the students and ask them to choose five words or phrases that appeal to them. The text can be a poem or prose.

In reporting its latest earnings, Amazon said that it was selling more Kindle books than paperback books, though the score is still close. Since January 1, for every 100 paperback books Amazon sold, 115 Kindle books were sold. To top it off, the company says that since the beginning of the year it's sold three times as many Kindle books as hardcover books. Amazon noted that this data was from "across Amazon.com's entire U.S. book business and includes sales of books where there is no Kindle edition." It added that free Kindle books were excluded from the tally.

It could also be a reading from their textbook. Have them use the five words or phrases in a poem. For example, in the news story about Amazon shown here, I have underlined the five words or phrases that I have chosen to use in the poem below.

*In reporting my failing grade,
The teacher said to me,
Although the score is still close to a pass,
This is a fail
To top it off, the teacher said
My bad behaviours were excluded from the tally*

Exercise 8

Recombine the words of the sentence below into as many different

sentences as possible. Then join the sentences together to make a poem.

“Nobody knows the woman he loves.”

*Nobody knows the woman he loves
The woman he loves knows nobody
He loves the woman nobody knows
He knows the woman loves nobody*

Exercise 9: Metaphor Poem

This is a great activity for teaching students to think visually. Choose a word from column A and column B and combine them to make a metaphor, e.g. “Life is a knife that can cause such pain”

Column A (abstract noun)	Column B (concrete noun)
Hope	a cage
Life	a knife
Marriage	an egg
Love	a brush
Anger	a window
Disappointment	a mirror

*Life is a knife that can cause such pain
Love is a window for hearts to open again
Hope is an egg that promises new life
Marriage is a brush that tidies away strife
Anger is a mirror as you echo my rage
Disappointment is a dark and lonely cage
Yes - life is a knife that can cause such pain*

Depending on the level of your learners, you can specify the grammatical structure of the sentences, e.g. for lower level learners you could specify the structure “A is like a B because _____”. Here is a simpler example that uses this structure.

Hope is like a knife because it can cut me
Life is like a mirror because we see the same thing again

5. Conclusion

Simple poetry writing activities can be highly motivational for even low-level students. I have used these exercises and many others with my learners and found them to be a wonderful learning activity. As the learners struggle to create a coherent meaningful message in a foreign language, they use all of their existing language resources, reach out for new ones, and arrive at the very heart of communication.