

POETS IN THE CLASSROOM: CREATIVE, COMMUNICATIVE DRILLS AND MEANINGFUL REPETITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of poetry in language teaching; in particular the way in which poems can be used to assist in the acquisition of structures, vocabulary and stress and intonation patterns.

The paper looks at children's rhymes and their possible value in both first and second language acquisition. It identifies rhymes and their possible value in both first and second language acquisition. It identifies rhymes that aid in vocabulary retention, and which repeat common structures and intonation patterns. It then shows how similar features in poems other than nursery rhymes can be utilised as creative or communicative meaningful drills in second language teaching and learning. Poetry can be used in two ways, as a vehicle for students to receive and practice new language patterns and as an active process whereby students create their own poems using a particular pattern.

The paper explores the concepts of creative communicative drilling and their link with poetry, where repetition and patterns are a natural feature. It shows how poetry can be used for creative drilling, where students make their own dills as a natural consequence of writing a poem, and for communicative drilling where students use a repeated pattern for a dramatic communicative purpose. It then examines the effectiveness of this approach, comparing it with other more traditional ways of practising language. The results of a small survey comparing retention of items taught in different ways will be given.

Poetry swings in and out of fashion in second language learning. At one time it is considered a valuable part of the culture of the English speaking world; at another time it is considered too literary and rarefied a subject; a cultural imposition on second language learners. One day it is not felt to be useful as a communicative tool; after all, it cannot be used much in conversation or business letters. On another, less serious day it is a useful device for practising the rhythms, intonation and stress of the English language. Its use as an integrated language learning tool is relatively new and has not yet been completely explored.

This paper looks at poetry from a utilitarian viewpoint. It examines how poetry, particularly the writing of poetry, can be used to help in the learning of language. I have largely ignored the cultural and literary aspects of poetry. Students, be they businessmen or schoolchildren, often do have some interest in the culture behind the language they are learning and this interest may be fostered by the use of poetry in the classroom. The possible motivational benefits are extremely important and in any study of the use of poetry in the classroom they cannot be ignored, since students are unlikely to respond well to a poem or task that does not motivate them. However, in this paper I have chosen to look at specific instances of language learning through writing poetry, rather than general benefits such as student interest. There are several reasons why poetry aids in language learning but one of the most important is the way in which a poem can be retained in the memory, often without conscious memorisation.

Rhyme, Repetition and Memory

Poetry is memorable. Some of our earliest memories are of rhymes recited by our parents. Most native speakers of English are familiar with the counting rhyme "One, two, buckle my shoe. . ." and could continue if asked. This particular rhyme is usually learned between the age of one and three and although not used by us for many years, is retained and trotted out to our own children after a gap of twenty years or more. The rhyme has a purpose and although I am sure one can learn to count without poetry, I am also certain that rhymes like this are a great aid to memory. Children's rhymes are an aid to the

memorisation and internalisation of knowledge in several ways. They are often seen to be a mnemonic, using rhyming pairs as a memory aid (three, four, knock at the door). They can form lexical sets such as the skipping rhyme

"Salt, pepper, mustard, vinegar"

and they often use repetition of structures. There is no evidence to suggest that children have to have this particular poetic repetition to learn their first language but this more stylized repetition echoes common features of motherese, the repetitive language with strong intonation and stress patterns that parents and other adults often use to babies (Kaye, 1980: 489, Waterson, 1971). The repeated condition in the rhyme below is one way in which a child can hear the same structure again and again and make sense of it.

If all the world were paper and all the seas were ink
If all the trees were bread and cheese what would we have to drink?

In a similar way the rhyme "Baa Baa Black Sheep" repeats the preposition "for".

Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir,
Three bags full.
One for the master,
One for the dame
And one for the little boy who lives down the lane.

This nursery rhyme contains a repetition similar to that of a parent when feeding a recalcitrant child. "Here's one for me, and one for Amity Helen, and one for you." In both the rhyme and the feeding ploy the preposition and the very strong, clear stress pattern are repeated. It may also be significant that in both cases there is a tendency for the speaker not to use the weak form for the preposition.

Because children's rhymes echo motherese they act as reinforcement in first language learning. They are, if you like, a stored base of motherese in rhyme, so as to be easily memorised by the child and easily recalled by the adult. They are short utterances, with few subordinate clauses. They are rhythmic, repetitive and repeatable. They stress common intonation patterns, such as question forms.

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
I've been to London to visit the queen.
Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you do there?
I frightened a little mouse under her chair.

Poetry in Language Teaching

Just as the first language learner uses rhymes as a part of the learning process so can the second language learner. However, there are differences between first and second language learning. First language learners are often happy with nonsense rhymes or nursery rhymes where the original meaning has long since lost its significance such as "Georgie Porgy", which was an attack on the prince regent, or "Little Jack Homer", a tale of corruption. Second language learners are not usually very small children and although, like a baby, they can benefit from repeated exposure to structures and speech patterns, they may need poems that have simple language but carry more complex concepts. Poems and rhymes can supply both first and second language learners with vocabulary, stress and intonation patterns, and repeated structures but when using poems with second language learners there is a need to consider how they are used and to what purpose they are used.

Poetry writing has a long history in the first language classroom. Sandy Brownjohn, advocating it as part of the U curriculum, describes it as being "the teaching of skills and techniques almost as much as the use of original ideas" (Brownjohn, 1980) and goes on to say "I would almost go so far as to say that most necessary skills in English can be taught through poetry at this level." From this one might infer that poetry writing might be of use in teaching skills to second language learners.

Poetry writing in the second language classroom seems to have a shorter history. It is possible to identify four main approaches to poetry in second language teaching, of which only one includes the writing of poetry. Any one of the four can aid in language learning and may stimulate an interest in poetry for its own sake but, as is so often the case in the teaching of poetry and literature, only a small minority of students come away with an enthusiasm for what they have been taught. If we are to use poetry in language learning it must be because we are confident it will stimulate and motivate students.

The first approach is for the learner to memorise a poem and to hope that with a little explanation of unfamiliar vocabulary the English will rub off onto the child and be absorbed. One series of books exemplifying this approach is *The Overseas Poetry Books Series* (Herbert ed., 1937). This series has clearly been popular. My copy, reprinted in 1976, shows 18 new impressions. It is somewhat Anglo-centric and perhaps a little colonial and paternalistic in places but the poems can generally be understood by young second language learners and unlike such anthologies for native speakers as the *Penguin Junior Voices* series it does not have a cultural and colloquial overload that can make poetry puzzling for the second language learner.

The second is a traditional literary approach. The poems here are more serious, the vocabulary more wide-ranging and some attempt is made by editor or teacher to bridge cultural gaps. An example is *Gateway to Poetry* (Boyle, ed. 1990). Here one can find worthy poems generally thought to be of literary value. It is aimed at secondary school students and those with a suitable command of English could well find it interesting. However, the first poem has a gloss of 28 words in fourteen lines so considerable motivation is first required on the part of the student to approach the reading of the poem. If this is so then it may be too much to expect the poem by itself to motivate the average student, which would be the aim in using poetry as a language learning tool. The heavy vocabulary load also promotes a heavy emphasis on meaning and draws the student away from any emotional response or response to the rhythm or other features of the poem. As Orme (1992:9) says in his book on poetry for young native speakers in primary schools, "The search for meaning as a priority response bedevils poetry teaching at all levels."

The third approach is connected more with language teaching than literary appreciation. Perhaps two of the better known books using this approach are *Poem into Poem* (Maley and Moulding, 1985) and *The Inward Ear* (Maley and Duff, 1989). In these, the poems are seen as stimuli, communicating information of interest to the learner and thus stimulating a linguistic response. Their value is primarily one of stimulus and encouragement of language learning. They encourage the student to explore language, interpret and discuss the ideas presented by the poet. "Poetry as literature" is an element of this approach, since poems are often analysed and students are encouraged to evaluate and criticise but it is not the major purpose of the poetry reading. These books also encourage poetry writing by students but the writing is not focused on any particular language points. "The writing is, in fact, an anchor for discussion" (Maley and Duff, 1989:3). *Poem Into Poem* also gives reasons for writing poems. The authors list "leads to real discussion ... playing with language ... allows you to bring in personal feelings" (Maley and Moulding, 1985). These are valid and important reasons for using poetry in the classroom, all connected with the inspiration and motivation of students. However, the use of the repetitive element in poems to practise language is neglected.

Finally, there is also the use of rhythm in poems for language teaching which is perhaps best exemplified by Carolyn Graham's *Jazz Chants*. This is of great value in teaching stress and intonation and also has repetition of structure as the following extract shows:

Do you know Mary?
 Mary who?
 Mary McDonald.
 Of course I do.
 Do you know her little brother?
 Yes, of course I do.

(Graham, 1978:25)

The chant goes on to repeat "Do you know" three more times and also repeats "Of course I do" and "I know her. . ." in the same way. In my view, Graham's jazz chants are drills. They fulfill a need for students to repeat patterns but avoid the boredom of many audiolingual drills.

All these uses of poetry can be of value in language teaching. However, one drawback to all of them except the "stimuli" approach of Alan Maley and others is that they are neither creative nor communicative. It is in the creative use of language to communicate ideas and emotions that students are likely to be motivated and encouraged to push their language to the limit. The "stimuli" approach does encourage creativity but loses the drilling elements of rhythm and repetition that assist in memorisation.

Writing Poems - Creative Drilling

There is a fourth way in which poetry can be utilised in the language classroom. This, like the third approach described above, is also language orientated and aims to assist students in their language learning. Rather than use poems to stimulate discussion or other language activities this approach uses input of some kind to stimulate the writing of poetry by students. Maley and Duff give a few examples of poems written by students but the purpose of using poetry writing is not fully

examined. Writing poetry can be a drilling process where students create their own drills, meaningful drills that communicate the ideas and emotions of the student to others. It combines the motivational benefits of the "stimuli" approach with the benefits of repetition and rhythm contained in the Jazz Chants approach. Some of the reasons why second language learners can benefit from writing poetry are outlined below.

1. Poems are short and thus it is easier to concentrate on a specific language point, unlike longer, more extensive tasks.
2. Poems often use repetition of structure and vocabulary in a natural way, giving the learner an opportunity to create a meaningful drill.
3. Poems often have great economy of expression. This means individual words and phrases can carry several meanings and connotations. This forces learners to examine the words they use more carefully than they might in their normal writing tasks.
4. Poetry writing is often a very personal process and the writer can become very involved. Thus there is a strong motivation to communicate successfully and precisely.
5. The personal nature of poetry writing and its importance to the writer means that new language is more likely to be retained for active use in the future.

This paper examines situations where the learner is presented with a poem as a model and is then asked to write a poem that has certain features in common with the model. In the classroom there are many other ways to introduce a poetry writing task, but in the context of a short paper on the topic this use of a poem as a model appeared to be the clearest way to demonstrate the connection between poetry writing, drilling and language learning.

As examples of the use of poetry writing in language learning I have taken two areas; poetry and grammar and poetry and vocabulary. One cannot, in practice, isolate these and clearly the task below involving question forms can also help practice intonation and stress. The areas described below are not the only areas of learning for students participating in the poetry writing activities suggested. However, I have chosen to look at two aspects of what is in reality a holistic learning process.

Poetry and Grammar

It may seem strange to introduce poetry and grammar together. Poets have a reputation as grammatical anarchists, shattering rules and conventions in their search for the essence of meaning. However, if we look closely at such defiance of grammatical rules we usually find that there is a reason for the poet's deviant grammar. The grammar is deviant in order to add to the meaning of the poem, to improve communication. It seems logical to treat students' poetry in the same way. Deviant grammar is only acceptable if it aids in communication. Mistakes are mistakes and need correcting. For this reason, like Sandy Brownjohn (1980) "I make no apology for mentioning the teaching of grammar ... in poetry..."

Earlier the children's nursery rhyme "Pussycat, pussycat where have you been?" was given as an example of a rhyme using question and answer forms. The question and answer format occurs in other poetic genres, notably the ballad. The example below is fairly typical and contains many instances of repetition of vocabulary and structure. It can be used as a model for question forms.

Lord Rendal

'O where have you been, Lord Rendal my son,
'O where have you been, my jolly young man?'
'In yonder wild woods, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'And whom met you there, Lord Rendal my son,
And whom met you there, my jolly young man?'
'I met with my true love, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'What got you for dinner, Lord Rendal my son,
What got you for dinner, my jolly young man?'
'A dish of small fishes, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'What like were the fishes, Lord Rendal my son,
What like were the fishes, my jolly young man?'

'Black backs and speckled bellies: make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'Who got the leavings, Lord Rendal my son,
Who got the leavings, my jolly young man?'
'My hawks and my hounds, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'And what became of them, Lord Rendai my son,
And what became of them, my jolly young man?'
'They swelled and died, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'I fear you are poisoned, Lord Rendal my son,
I fear you are poisoned, my jolly young man'
'O yes I am dying, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'What will you leave to your mother, Lord Rendai my son,
What will you leave to your mother, my jolly young man?'
'Four and twenty milch kine, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'What will you leave to your father, Lord Rendal my son,
What will you leave to your father, my jolly young man?'
'My horse and saddle, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'What will you leave to your sister, Lord Rendal my son,
What wif you leave to your sister, my jolly young man?'
'Both my gold box and rings, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

'What will you leave to your true love, Lord Rendal my son,
What will you leave to your true love,
my jolly young man?'
'The tow and the halter, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and fain would lie down.'

(Graves 1957: 5)

This is a traditional ballad and contains a number of archaic forms with some vocabulary that is no longer widely used. A bright fast moving class would probably quickly understand this and in their own versions of a question and answer ballad would use standard forms or even deliberately take archaic forms from the original for some special effect. A slower class might require the teacher to modernise the language of the ballad, I do not see anything wrong in altering the words in this way. There are already many versions of this ballad in existence and changes such as the ones below to stanza three do not substantially alter the nature of the ballad.

*"What did you eat, Lord Rendal my son,
What did you eat, my jolly young man?"*
A dish of small fishes, mother; make my bed soon,
For I'm wearied with hunting and I need to lie down.

In this dramatic ballad Lord Rendal is poisoned by a dish of black-backed speckled toads, fooled into thinking they were fish by his girlfriend, who is probably a witch. Such dramatic events do not happen often in the lives of our students. As David Orme (1992) says, writing of primary school children, "The hamster doesn't die every day." Death, whether of hamsters or humans, is not such a common occurrence and witches are not found on street corners. There are, however, several ways to use the ballad that are relevant to second language students and enable them to write a ballad that, as well as having meaning acts as a structure drill. One is to call on the imagination and creativity of the students. "Imagine you are dying. Where are you? Does it hurt? Where does it hurt? Why are you dying? What has happened? Who are you talking to?" From this lead in the students build up a dramatic scenario for their own ballad. Another approach might be to use students' past experience; perhaps a past serious illness or accident. Yet another way of using the ballad might be to lighten the tone and ask students to write a ballad concerning food poisoning. This often produces ballads showing a surprising depth of feeling concerning the student canteen. In Hong Kong and Macau, as well as problems of quality in institutional food and hygiene problems in restaurants, there are also frequent outbreaks of poisoning caused by eating vegetables grown by over-enthusiastic pesticide using farmers in mainland China. There are enough points of contact between student and ballad for them to produce poems that have relevance to their lives and their feelings.

I find this activity particularly useful with remedial students in the university where I teach. Such students may have spent twelve years learning English but have very little productive command of the language. They can cope with gap-filling exercises and sentence drilling exercises but, having been taught in large classes in an environment that discourages student initiated exchanges, rarely ask genuine questions in class. Writing a ballad in this form is a creative meaningful drill. Students choose various question forms such as "What will you. . ."; "what did you. . ." and "where have you. . .". They have a real message to communicate and a set of structures that are repeated but not identical. The combination of creativity, meaning and repetition gives great power to the task as a learning activity.

Poetry and Vocabulary

Some poems deal in vocabulary sets. Gyles Brandreth's poem "Animal Chatter" (Foster ed., 1982) uses adjectives derived from animals that are used to describe humans (dog tired, sluggish, elephantine, etc.). Couple this poem with "Ferret" by Keith Bosley (ibid.), which starts "Ferret is a verb with teeth. . .", and you have a vocabulary set followed by a task using the vocabulary. Students first read Brandreth's poem with its multitude of animal-derived adjectives. Then they see how Bosley Links the verb "to ferret" with the behaviour and nature of the animal from which it is derived. The students then choose an animal-derived adjective for themselves and write a similar poem. The example below, written by a postintermediate student, shows how the delving into meaning for one word, "crabby", leads to further vocabulary discovery and use ("carapace", "bumpy", "lumpy", the use of "claw" as a verb) and incidentally gives an insight into the rather negative connotation of 'lumpy' by connecting it with crabby.

CRABBY

Crabby is an adjective
with pincers to complain.
It has ten legs, a carapace
and it claws.
You must tie it up or
it will become the noun PAIN.
Be careful in handling it so
you will not have bumpy, lumpy fingers
In the end.

Deolinda

With students exchanging their poems and comments it is surprising how many vocabulary items can be absorbed in a relatively short space of time. It seems that the constant repetition of the key-words in these exchanges, allied with the concentration on meaning and imagery helps retention of the vocabulary items. It also helps that the animals from which the adjectives are derived often give a clue to the meaning.

Some poems are exercises in wordplay. The excerpt below is from a poem dealing with the mysteries of prefixes.

I am such a dolent man
I eptly work each day
My acts are all becilic
I've just ane things to say.

(Parker, Daily Mall Annual 1953:42).

This poem continues with more "false positives" from words that appear to be negative but have either lost their positive form or have a Latin or Greek root, making the meaning unclear to students. Again students may like to extend this set either from their own knowledge or by dictionary use. They can then produce a poem describing themselves, another person or place using the "non-existent positives" of the words they have discovered. This is an example of an activity where students deliberately break language rules but by breaking them show a command of the language. Finding such words as (un)scathed, (un)dulate, (re)ctif~, (re)ject is an entertainment and appears to be an aid to memory. As well as "non-existent positives" students might be able to work on "misaligned negatives" like "appoint" and "disappoint", "take" and "mistake" or "light" and "delight". In these cases positive and negative forms exist but they are not opposite in meaning. Most students have spent many years feeling that their use of English is controlled and limited by the "rules" of the language and to be able to point out things in the language that look like errors in logic gives a sense of power and control. Here the repetition and focus is actually on words that do not exist but, rather like learning exceptions to a rule, knowledge of what is wrong and does not work can often aid in learning what is correct.

Poems and structure: an aid to memory?

Having tried a number of poem writing tasks and found a generally enthusiastic response from students, I set about finding a task where I might attempt to measure the effectiveness of poem writing as an aid to memory and acquisition. I chose to use a structure rather than vocabulary as there is already a body of evidence to show that repetition of vocabulary is an aid to memory. Ellis (1985: 103-104) describes a number of vocabulary learning strategies, all of which involve repetition in some way.

My intention was to revise a type 2 conditional form~ with two similar classes. These were remedial students at a lower intermediate level. I would have preferred not to use remedial students but I had no choice. They had been taught the basic form of the second conditional many times before, but for a number of them the focus had been on the form rather than the meaning or use. Because of this they had trouble in choosing appropriate verb tense combinations for particular probability situations.

Both groups were given a preliminary test. This consisted of conditional sentences postulating unlikely/impossible situations. Students were asked to put the verbs in each sentence into the correct form. An example is given below.

If Dr. Sun Yat Sen (be) here now he (be) amazed by the changes in Macau.

The results of this and other tests on both groups are given in Appendix A.

The control group were taught in a fairly traditional way. They were given models which were then contrasted with other conditional forms to which they had been exposed. They then had controlled practice followed by free practice. Two weeks later they were tested on their ability to recall one of the sentences they had created in their controlled practice and on their ability to use this type of conditional, the form of this part of the test being the same as that given to the poetry group.

The poetry group were given a model in the form of a rhyme. They were asked to produce similar rhymes using second conditional structures. They then used the structure in other situations. Two weeks later they were asked to recall their rhyme and were tested on their ability to use this type of conditional.

The second group were asked to think of someone they disliked intensely. They were then given a rhyme.

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If I were a pirate
I'd make you walk the plank
And I'd watch the crocodiles eat you
As you very slowly sank.
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It was necessary to illustrate the rhyme in order to get the meaning across quickly, but a quick sketch on the board produced immediate comprehension. The students' task was to think of a suitable fate for someone they hated, and a hypothetical position of power for themselves so that they could bring about the demise of their enemy. Knife wielding butchers, bakers with ovens, and judges were popular choices. One student wanted to be a general who could send his victim to certain death in battle. Another wrote about a surgeon whose operations were somewhat macabre. In every case the student was responsible for linking a profession and a method of murdering or harming their victim. They also had to work out a rhyme, though provided the lines were roughly the same length it was not necessary for them to scan exactly. It was clear, from the nature of the task, that this was a hypothetical situation and students' work was checked to ensure grammatical accuracy. As the students drafted and redrafted their work they repeated the structure many times. This was especially so when it came to checking that they had lines that rhymed. Some students had to rewrite six or seven times as they struggled to find words that rhymed and had meaning in the context of their poem.

Two weeks later the poetry group was tested for recall and ability to use the structure they had been practising. They were first asked to recall their rhyme and then, like the control group, to produce other type 2 conditional sentences. They were asked to put a list of unlikely situations on the whiteboard and then to choose five to make "if" sentences.

Conclusion

This was a small scale test. The poetry group did perform perceptibly better but it cannot be definitely ascribed to the writing of the short rhyme. One possibility is that the teacher's enthusiasm for the poetic method might have influenced the students' motivation. Another is that the motivation aroused by the invention of a horrific end to one's enemy was of more value than the repetition of structure as the students drafted and redrafted their poems. However, it was the motivation and the desire to

do things properly that led to the repetition and so the two factors could not easily be divorced. The control group failed to recall accurately the sentence they had worked on two weeks ago but this was to be expected. The poetry group learned well, remembered the structure better and they enjoyed the activity. They wrote a poem; they learned some language.

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APPENDIX 1

Control Group: 22 students

Poem Group: 20 students

		Control (%)	Poem (%)
Preliminary test	correct form of structure	43	45
Recall	correct structure	59	85
	accurate recall of structure and sentence/poem	18	55
	fewer than 3 differences in recall	32	85
Ability to use structure	correct instances of use	61	78

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