
El elefante y la hormiga: Writing Poetry in Foreign Language Classes

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In ancient times, the Irish believed that any knowledge or rule of law that did not pass through the heart was dangerous; only poets were allowed to be their teachers and kings. The reverence for verse in Ireland was such that some believed certain words to be so powerful that they could be used only by poets, a notion that has remained steadfast as adults and students alike regard the writing of poetry to be a challenge beyond them, something reserved for the elite. Even reading poetry falls into disfavor as students get older (Morgan, 1994). The disaffection with which reading and writing poetry is viewed led Adrienne Rich to ask, "What is it that allows many people in the United States to accept the view of poetry as a luxury rather than food for all: food for the heart and senses, food of memory and hope?" (Heard, 1999). Roque Dalton in his poem "Like you" includes the lines: "I believe the world is beautiful and that poetry, like bread, is for everyone" (2005).

Some would argue that a need for rhyme and rhythm was in our soul (Danielson, & LaBonty, 1994). Children are born with a preference for 'baby talk', often called 'motherese' or even 'parentese' or 'caregiver talk' to give the term more flexibility. Regardless, infants will suck on a blind nipple connected to a mechanism that plays recorded speech to hear motherese, but not to hear ordinary conversation (Reich, 1986). The lilting language, pauses, stress, use of rhyme, rhythm, and nonsense that characterize baby talk are the components of poetry. While not all cultures include 'motherese,' they all have song and rhyme, the elements of poetry.

Children invent poetic language when they first learn to talk. A three-year-old walks through the house, repeating the names of her imaginary friends in a sing-song voice: "Pinky Pong, Suffy, Beepa and Boppa, Pinky Pong, Suffy, Beepa and Boppa!" (Danielson & LaBonty, 1994, p. 140).

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Children taunt one another with rhythmic threats:

Nyah nyah nyah, nyah, nyah

I'm gonna tell.

Nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah

You can't get me!

Playground games are often accompanied by a special chorus of words:

Red Rover

Red Rover

Send Amy right over!

Even coaches encourage young athletes to participate in infield chatter that is very poetic:

Hey batter

Hey batter

Hey batter

SWING!

Foreign language teachers who involve their students with poetry will be reawakening a style of language for which they have an affinity, the language that fills childhood games and rituals. The musical quality of poetry, the careful selection of the words of poetry, and the ability of poetry to give us a refreshing outlook and to feel and think make it an ideal vehicle for writing tasks in a foreign language class.

The benefits of writing poetry in foreign language classes

Connection to national standards

The values of having students write poetry are commonly known, widely accepted, and connected to the national standards in foreign language. The national standards (SFL) emphasize language skills that are evident in poetry (*Standards for Foreign Language Education for the 21st Century*, 1999):

COMMUNICATION:

Communication in languages other than English

Standard 1.1: Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions.

Standard 1.2: Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics.

Standard 1.3: Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics.

Furthermore, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines — Writing (Revised, 2001) state that Superior-level writers can express themselves effectively both concretely and abstractly and can control language structures. Even Advanced- and Intermediate-level writers are expected to describe, paraphrase, and elaborate

***“...only poets
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ponents of poetry.”***

in their writing and to create with the language and express meaning through vocabulary. Depending on the type of poetry selected, the level of language ability required can range from Novice to Advanced.

“Writing poetry helps students develop voice...”

Poetry and language facility

Writing poetry helps students develop facility with figurative language, a precursor to abstract and analytical thinking (Steinberg, 1999). Students will be more adept with foreign language vocabulary and grammatical structures when they are required to compare and contrast, summarize, describe and interpret, all facets of poetic writing (Langer & Applebee, 1987). Writing poetry helps students develop voice in their written work (Kuhlman & Bradley, 1999), a facet of expressing feelings, emotions and exchanging opinions. Poetry demands that words be carefully chosen, encouraging students studying foreign languages to be thoughtful in their word selection. When we remove the expectation of rhyme, poetry writing takes on new possibilities for quality writing since skillfully written poems often depend on syllable count, on a specific number of words, or certain parts of speech for rhythm and structure (LaBonty, 1997; Luce-Kapler, 1999).

Poetry and classroom dynamics

Teachers will be the most likely to achieve their instructional goals when students are involved with student-centered activities, cooperative learning, and activities that include problem solving — all components of writing poetry (Seffrin, 1990). The collaborative work often involved in writing poetry helps students function as “problem-solvers rather than information receivers” (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2001).

Poetry is generally briefer than prose and writing it makes less demand on time during the day; its brevity is appealing to novice writers and those who teach them. By its very nature, poetry is reductive. The poet is challenged to express complex ideas and feelings in a few words or short verses. Students with limited vocabulary may be overwhelmed by writing narrative papers, but will find poetry a refreshing option. The process of writing poetry requires interpersonal communication and lends itself to partner work and cooperative writing, giving the teacher flexibility in grouping for poetry-writing activities for foreign language class.

Poetry and personal connections

The everyday lives of students are the stuff of poetry: what they think and feel, what they worry over, what they cherish. Lillian Morrison puts it this way: “Writing poetry can be a way of pinning down a dream, capturing a moment, a memory, a happening, it’s a way of sorting out your thoughts and feelings” (Heard, 1999).

Involving students with poetry writing encourages them to personalize learning; when the individual details of students’ lives are valued and given attention, the study of a foreign language seems less abstract.

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Poetic writing in foreign language classes

Morgan (1994) extols the value of using poetry as a means of teaching and learning in adolescent and adult foreign language classes. She notes that while a study of poetry is central to any literature class and is an important component of EFL classes, it is rarely included in foreign language classes. Students do not hear it, read it, or write it. Rosen (1989) also argues that poetry is a form of writing that gives students a sense of power over their own knowledge and broadens their language usage beyond functional and practical applications. Morgan (1994) claims that stu-

dents seldom explore the wider range of language usage. The highly personal nature of poetry allows students to incorporate imagination and fantasy into their writing, increasing intimate involvement (Mummert, as cited in Morgan, 1994). Writing poetry also affords students the opportunity to express wit, jokes and puns, and to explore emotionally powerful topics, such as love (Hayhoe & Parker, 1988).

With students of French, Morgan (1994) explored the use of shape poetry, poetry written in the shape of the subject of the poem, e.g., a poem about fish in the shape of a fish. Students wrote free verse poems that would be displayed as art in the classroom. The simple grammatical form that some poetry takes increases its effectiveness as a teaching tool (Morgan, 1994).

The quality of the finished product can be enhanced with specific teaching strategies. If students brainstorm before they begin their poems, it will help them choose words carefully. Developing semantic maps will encourage young poets to organize their thoughts. Semantic maps, often called graphic organizers, are frequently used during brainstorming when students are just collecting thoughts. Semantic maps help students remember and arrange words and ideas that will be the substance of their poetry.

Once the teacher has introduced the rhythmic elements or patterns of a specific poem, one or two examples can be developed as a class. The following samples were written by high school and college students in Spanish classes. In poems with a syllable count, students tried to stay as close to the requirements as possible while maintaining the theme of the poem. (Poems may not translate easily or well into English.)

“Writing patterned poetry reinforces description and grammatical structures.”

Poetic writing

Patterned poetry

Writing patterned poetry reinforces description and grammatical structures. It nurtures vocabulary

“The quality of the finished product can be enhanced with specific teaching strategies.”

development and is an activity that places the emphasis on a finished product of which to be proud rather than writing something acceptable (Collie & Slater, 1987).

I used to be ... but now poems

Students can use the following pattern:

I used to be _____

But now I'm _____

Yo era _____ pero ahora soy _____.

_____ era yo pero ahora _____ soy.

The sentence was repeated and the word order mixed to add some interest and variety. These sentences were added to the end of name poems that students wrote using their English name or a Spanish name, if Spanish names were used in class. They chose an adjective that described them for each letter of their name and then used adjectives with opposite meanings for the final sentences. Use of interesting adjectives and attention to adjective agreement were stressed.

Sample of student work:

JESSICA

Joven

Enérgica

Simpática

Sensible

Independiente

Curiosa

Ambiciosa

Yo era tímida pero ahora soy extrovertida.

Callada era yo pero ahora habladora soy.

JESSICA

Young

Energetic

Nice

Sensitive

Independent

Curious

Ambitious

I used to be shy but now I'm outgoing.

Quiet was I but now talkative I am.

Alphabet pyramids

These cumulative poems contain specific parts of speech that begin with the same letter. They are appropriate for all levels and are ideal for illustrating and displaying in the classroom. They are also fun to share orally and are good "tongue twisters" to practice pronunciation. They rarely translate well.

Line I: the letter

Line 2: a noun

Line 3: add an adjective (watch agreement)

Line 4: add a verb or verb form

Line 5: add an adverb (-mente form)

Samples of student work:

R
Ranas
Ranas Rápidos
Reduzco Ranas Rápidos
Reduzco Ranas Rápidos Raramente

R
Frogs
Fast Frogs
I Subdue Fast Frogs
I Subdue Fast Frogs Rarely

P
Preguntas
Preguntas Personales
Preguntando Preguntas Personales
Preguntando Preguntas Personales Persistentemente

P
Questions
Personal Questions
Asking Personal Questions
Asking Personal Questions Persistently

Terquain

A terquain is a descriptive, three-line poem. This is appropriate for all levels and can be used as a directed work with the instructor providing the first line or offering a general topic to be addressed. It encourages the use of vivid words to create an image or reaction. It can be as simple or complex as the skill level of the writer allows.

Line 1: one word, the subject

Line 2: one or two words about the subject

Line 3: one word, a feeling about the subject

Samples of student work:

Arte
Mi foco
Salvación

Art
My focus
Salvation

Graduación
El mundo me espera
Libertad

Graduation
The world awaits me
Freedom

Cinquain

A cinquain is a five line descriptive poem that contains about 22 syllables. Students were encouraged to come as close to the syllable count as possible without sacrificing meaning. Because the syllable count requires some ability to manipulate the language, this poem is best suited for intermediate and advanced students.

Line 1: the subject

Line 2: four syllables describing the subject (adjectives, watch agreement)

Line 3: six syllables showing action (conjugated verbs or present participles: *-ando/-iendo* form)

Line 4: eight syllables expressing a feeling or observation about the subject

Line 5: two syllables renaming the subject

Sample of student work:

España
Cálido, Grande
Bronceando, Nadando
Me encanta el helado
Madrid

Spain
Hot, Big
Tanning, Swimming
I love the ice cream
Madrid

Diamante

A diamante is a seven-line poem that compares opposites using specific parts of speech. The diamond shape of the finished product gives this poem its name and it is ideal for helping students compare and contrast concepts. It is appropriate for all levels. This is an ideal poem to illustrate and display in the classroom.

Line 1: noun for the subject

Line 2: two adjectives describing the subject (watch agreement)

Line 3: three participles (*-ando/-iendo* form) describing subject

Line 4: four nouns, two about the subject, two about its antonym

Line 5: three participles (*-ando/-iendo* form) describing the antonym

“...the syllable count requires some ability to manipulate the language...”

Line 6: two adjectives describing the antonym (watch agreement)
Line 7: the antonym

Samples of student work:

Inmadurez
Joven, Molestoso
Burlándose, Divirtiéndose, Riéndose
Chistes, Juegos, Responsabilidades, Empleos
Hablando, Trabajando, Alcanzando
Respetuoso, Diligente, Trabajador
Madurez

Immaturity
Young, Bothersome
Making fun, Having fun, Laughing
Jokes, Games, Responsibilities, Jobs
Speaking, Working, Achieving
Respectful, Diligent, Hard-working
Maturity

Elefante
Grande, Fuerte
Comiendo, Bañándose, Caminando
Sociable, Gris, Negra, Rápida
Trabajando, Comiendo, Corriendo
Ocupada, Pequeña
Hormiga

Elephant
Big, Strong
Eating, Bathing, Walking
Sociable, Gray, Black, Quick
Working, Eating, Running
Busy, Little
Ant

I Like Poem

This poem provides practice with the verb *gustar* (to like) and others like it. It reinforces adjective agreement and placement and encourages using prepositional phrases to create a mental picture. It is appropriate for all levels and allows even beginning students to create a long, original work. This is an ideal poem to illustrate and display in the classroom.

I LIKE

I like (noun) _____

Adj. _____ Noun _____

Adj. _____ Noun _____

Adj. _____ Noun _____
 Adj. _____ Noun _____
 Any kind of _____
 I like _____
 Noun _____ Prep. Phrase _____
 Noun _____ Prep. Phrase _____
 Noun _____ Prep. Phrase _____
 Noun _____ Prep. Phrase _____
 I like _____
 Adj. _____ Noun _____
 Adj. _____ Noun _____
 Adj. _____ Noun _____
 Adj. _____ Noun _____
 Adj. _____ Noun _____
 Adj. _____ Noun _____
 I like _____

Me Gusta(n)

Me gusta(n) (sustantivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____

Cualquier tipo de (sustantivo) _____

Me gusta(n) (sustantivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Preposición) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Preposición) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Preposición) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Preposición) _____

Me gusta(n) (sustantivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____
 (Sustantivo) _____ (Adjetivo) _____

Me gusta(n) (sustantivo) _____

Sample of student work:

Me Gusta
 Me gustan los libros.
 Libros contemporáneos.
 Libros clásicos.
 Libros populares.
 Libros poco conocidos.
 Cualquier tipo de libro.

Me gustan los libros.
Libros encima de mi escritorio.
Libros debajo de la mesita.
Libros cerca de mi mano.
Libros en un sillón cómodo.
Me gustan los libros.
Libros políticos.
Libros humorísticos.
Libros misteriosos.
Libros conmovedores.
Libros espantosos.
Me gustan los libros.

I Like
I like books.
Contemporary books.
Classical books.
Popular books.
Obscure (little known) books.
Any kind of book.
I like books.
Books on top of my desk.
Books under the end table.
Books close at hand.
Books in a comfortable chair.
I like books.
Political books.
Humorous books.
Puzzling books.
Moving books.
Scary books.
I like books.

Definition poems

Definition poems are simple verses that reinforce adjective agreement.

Name it

Describe it

Tell where it would be found

Tell more about it

Use emotion words to tell how you feel about this

Explain why you used the emotion words on line 5

Example:

Clean air
Clear and exhilarating
Cushioning mountains, patting down the deserts

***“Once we remove
the expectation
for rhyme, poetry
takes on new possibilities of quality
writing as writers
focus on syllable
count, a specific
number of words,
or parts of speech
for rhythm and
structure.”***

Bringing us perfect oxygen
I breathe deeply and exhale slowly
The day can begin

Sample of student work:

*Un regalo
Inesperado y bello
Saludándome encima de la mesa
Envuelto en oro
Símbolo de amor y orgullo
Día de graduación*

A gift
Unexpected and beautiful
Greeting me on the table
Wrapped in gold
Symbol of love and pride
Graduation day

Conclusion

Poetry and foreign language study would seem to be natural partners. Poetry is briefer than prose and writing it makes less demand on students in foreign language classes whose vocabulary is limited and whose grammatical competence is still developing. The process requires interpersonal communication and lends itself to partner work and cooperative writing. Once we remove the expectation for rhyme, poetry takes on new possibilities of quality writing as writers focus on syllable count, a specific number of words, or parts of speech for rhythm and structure. As students put their own words to the language concepts they are studying, a foreign language finds deeper meaning and poetry becomes its voice.

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