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Poetry for language development of English language learners

Various genres of literature furnish English language learners opportunities to explore and build an appreciation for the subtleties of language. However, poetry is often neglected with English language learners.

In part, teachers feel it is too difficult for students struggling to learn a new language. Yet, poetry is especially effective for language learning (Cullinan, Scala, & Schroder, 1995; Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2001a, 2001b). Indeed, we would advocate that poetry is ideal for literacy development. The purpose of this article is to examine the special benefits of poetry for English language learners. In addition, we highlight how to build a classroom collection of poetry suited for English language learners as well as how to share poems and involve those students who are new to English with this powerful genre of literature.

THE BENEFITS OF POETRY FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Poetry provides many instructional advantages for English language learners. First, poetry is "packaged" in very few words, relatively speaking (Cullinan, Scala, & Schroder, 1995). Poems can be read and reread in very little time. The length is less intimidating to English language learners overwhelmed by longer prose and streams of new vocabulary. Although poetry may also present new words and

concepts, its shorter appearance provides a motivating advantage. In addition, because of its brevity, poetry serves as a brief but powerful anticipatory set for longer literary works as well as for the introduction of concepts and content across the curriculum (Chatton, 1993; Cullinan, Scala, & Schroder, 1995). Teachers can set the stage for a new topic, unit, etc. with a quick look at a poem. What is more, poetry provides a source of brief character sketches, scenes, and stories that can prompt writing from students (Vogel & Tilley, 1993).

The strong oral quality of poetry is another powerful pedagogical plus. Poetry is meant to be read aloud. The poem's meaning is more clearly communicated when both read and heard. This helps language learners in acquiring correct word pronunciations and incorporates listening vocabulary in aiding their overall comprehension. In addition, the rhythm and/or rhyme of poetry helps English language learners get a sense of the sound of English words and phrases using artful, yet natural language. As English language learners gain practice in reading poems aloud using various formats, they increase their fluency in delivery and feel more confident with this new language.

A final benefit of poems is that they tend to be about one topic. This crystallized focus of poetry can aid English language learners as they use their word knowledge to make sense of new content. The

poems' context can help the reader or listener incorporate new vocabulary. Even word play, puns, colloquialisms, and double meanings can be experienced and explained through poetry. For example, a poem like "Leftovers" (**It's Thanksgiving**, 1982) by Jack Prelutsky is a Thanksgiving poem very clearly about one subject. Although words like "bisque" or "fritters" may be unfamiliar, the poem's context helps provide a broader context and clarification. Such word play can be particularly challenging for English language learners who may interpret words and phrases literally. However, when English language learners read the poem, hear the poem, read aloud, and participate in a choral reading of the poem, they've had multiple modes of reinforcement for meaningful language learning. Repeated readings allow children to gain fluency and build sight vocabulary while having successful reading experiences. Poetry also contains elements of predictability such as rhyme, rhythm and repetition which make reading easier" (Gill, 1996, p. 28).

Once teachers become familiar with the many possibilities that poetry offers, they need to collect examples of poems to meet the varying language proficiency needs and backgrounds of English language learners. In the next section, we highlight the types of poetry books that teachers of English language learners can begin to pull together for their classrooms.

CREATING A CLASSROOM COLLECTION OF POETRY FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Gathering poetry books for a classroom collection

for English language learners is not always an easy task since less poetry is published than other genres. Luckily, more variety is present in poetry for young people today including narrative, lyric, and free verse, as well as limericks, ballads, concrete, and haiku, among others noted in Table 1. This rich diversity of poems, poetic picture books, poetry collections and such are ideally suited for English language learners to increase their word knowledge, familiarity with English syntax patterns, and even conceptual background. We know from studies of children's preferences (Kutiper & Wilson, 1993) that most children enjoy narrative storytelling poems which have a regular, distinctive rhythm, strong sound patterns, plenty of humor, and not too much abstract and figurative language. It is our contention, however, that children develop a taste for many different kinds of poems once they are introduced to them. Therefore, we provide an overview of a few different trends in publishing poetry books for young people and consider how they might benefit English language learners.

Bilingual poetry books

An important asset to a poetry collection for all classrooms, especially those with English language learners, is the inclusion of bilingual poetry. There are many collections of poetry in both English and Spanish, for example, including **Laughing Out Loud, I Fly: Poems In English In Spanish** by Juan Herrera (1998), **My Mexico ~Mexico Mio** by Tony Johnston (1996), and for intermediate students **The Tree Is Older**

Table 1. Poetry comes in all kinds of rhyming and patterned books that may not look like "poetry"

Rhyming Picture Books (Sheep In A Jeep by Nancy Shaw)
Rhythmic Picture Books (Goodnight, Moon by Margaret Wise Brown)
Predictable Books (Is Your Mama A Llama? by Deborah Guarino)
Easy-To-Read Books ("Not Now!" Said The Cow by Joanne Oppenheim)
Alphabet Books (It Begins With A by Stephanie Calmenson)
Counting Books (An Invitation To The Butterfly Ball by Jane Yolen)
Dr. Seuss (Green Eggs And Ham)
Song Picture Books (Mary Had A Little Lamb photoillustrated by Bruce McMillan)
Folk Songs In Book Form (Arroz Con Leche collected by Lulu Delacre)
Jump Rope And Ball Bouncing Rhymes (Anna Banana by Janna Cole)
Clapping Games, Chants, Cheers (Street Rhymes Around The World by Jane Yolen)
Street Songs And Raps (Night On Neighborhood Street by Eloise Greenfield)
Riddles, Tongue Twisters, Counting Games, Nonsense Verse (And the Green Grass Grew All Around collected by Alvin Schwartz)

Than You Are (1995) collected by Naomi Shihab Nye, or poems that have examples of code switching—using Spanish words and phrases within the English text such as **Confetti** by Pat Mora (1999) or **Canto Familiar** by Gary Soto (1995). Other bilingual collections include Michio Mado's Japanese/English anthologies, **The Animals** (1992) and **The Magic Pocket** (1998). English language learners or their parents could read poems in their native languages and provide a written version as well. Such a focus on promoting other languages can foster a positive learning environment.

Anthologies

The format of the poetry anthology has been around since publishing began. It's a practical way to collect a multitude of poems on a variety of subjects by many different poets. These oversized books with hundreds of poems are generally not very inviting to today's English language learners (or teachers), and have gradually become replaced by other kinds of more selective anthologies. Indeed, Lee Bennett Hopkins (1993) makes a distinction between collections and anthologies. Using his nomenclature, there are two types of collections: "Single Author" where all of the poems are by the same poet (**Who's Been Sleeping In My Porridge?** by Colin McNaughton, 1990), and "Single Topic" collections where all of the poems address the same topic (**Halloween Poems** selected by Myra Cohn Livingston, 1989). He defines anthologies as "books put together to highlight a variety of topics with multiple poets" (**Sing A Song Of Popcorn** selected by de Regniers, Moore, White, & Carr, 1988). For example, a recent compilation of works edited by poet Jack Prelutsky is a single topic collection of animal poems called, **The Beauty Of The Beast** (1997). It is visually appealing and very inclusive of many excellent poems without being overwhelming. The more narrow topic of "animals" makes it easier for a teacher or librarian to conceive of how to connect it with the current curriculum. This more teacher-friendly thematic collection approach is becoming very popular. Practically speaking, it makes it even easier to open a science or social studies lesson with a poem when a book of poems on that very topic is available. For English language learners, this content connection provides enormous help for comprehension when poems of related subject matter are shared (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Multicultural poetry

Most recently, we have seen an increase in the publication of multicultural poetry. These works may speak to English language learners, in particular, with their themes of biculturalism, cultural identity, and cultural heritage. Poets such as Janet Wong, Gary Soto, and Nikki Giovanni give voice to these and many other experiences. Multicultural poetry is often first published as cultural collections or anthologies, such as in **The Tree Is Older Than You Are** (Nye, 1995) or **On The Road Of Stars: Native American Night Poems And Sleep Charms** (Bierhorst, 1994). These provide an excellent introduction to poetry from cultural perspectives that may be unfamiliar to teachers or English language learners.

In terms of African American poets, Eloise Greenfield, winner of the National Council of Teachers of English Poetry Award for lifetime contribution to poetry for children, is not-to-be-missed. Check out **Honey, I Love** (1978) and **Night On Neighborhood Street** (1991). Then, in social studies when reading about the Underground Railroad, share the spirited poem, "Harriet Tubman" (Greenfield, **Honey I Love**, 1978). Students enjoy the mini-biography as well as the strong rhythm of the language. For middle school or high school, Angela Shelf Medearis is a new voice whose work, **Skin Deep** (1995), captures adolescent angst beautifully, with humor and pathos. To share some of these voices with your students today, delve into **Pass It On, My Black Me: A Beginning Book Of Black Poetry** (Hudson, 1993) and Ashley Bryan's **ABC Of African American Poetry** (1997), both excellent anthologies of poems by many of the best African American poets.

There is an increasing number of published collections of Hispanic poetry for children from which to share. Teachers can choose a few favorites to read out loud from the classroom collection, for example, "My Teacher in the Market Place" by Gary Soto (**Canto Familiar**, 1995). This poem describes a child's surprise at encountering her teacher at the grocery store! In another poem from **Canto Familiar**, "Spanish," Gary Soto paints a joyous picture of bilingualism arguing that knowing two languages can actually enlarge one's world. In contrast, the poem, "Elena" from Pat Mora's **My Own True Name** (2000), poignantly portrays a young mother struggling to learn English and beginning to feel the estrangement from her children who are now part of an English speaking world. To motivate English language learners to explore

Hispanic American poetry, gather a selection books and invite students to read aloud their own favorites. If you are a Spanish speaker or have Spanish-speaking students, share the Spanish poems or try bilingual read alouds.

In terms of Asian American authors, one outstanding poet is Janet Wong, a new author whose early work explores her Korean-Chinese-American roots in a fresh and direct way that English language learners will find very relevant. Her poem, "Speak Up" (from **Good Luck Gold**, 1994) can be read chorally by many voices vs. a lone voice. This can vividly bring home the point that we may look "different," but we're all Americans. Teachers, however, must be careful of pigeonholing any poet as "multicultural" because each writer has many facets and continues to grow as an artist and as an individual. In fact, this can be a helpful demonstration for English language learners as is the case of Janet Wong's early work in **Good Luck Gold** (1994) or **Suitcase of Seaweed** (1996). There her focus is clearly on her family roots and relationships as an American of both Chinese and Korean descent. Her next works, **The Rainbow Hand** (1999) and **Behind The Wheel** (1999), and **Night Garden** (2000), on the other hand, are beautiful collections that explore other experiences and relationships, not exclusively cultural in nature. Either way, her writing is fresh and clear, and students of all backgrounds respond to her simple and direct style.

Finally, don't overlook Native American poetry which can include a variety of forms including rhymes, free verse, chants, charms, prayers, blessings, lullabies, warnings, eulogies, wishes, prophecies, healings, war chants, night songs, magic songs, medicine songs, mother/child poems. Joseph Bruchac has several collections: **Between Earth And Sky** (1996), **Four Ancestors: Stories, Songs, And Poems From Native North America** (1996), **The Earth Under Sky Bear's Feet** (1998), and **Thirteen Moons On Turtle's Back** (1992).

Poetry across the curriculum

Many recent poetry anthologies focus on specific content areas or concepts. These collections provide a rich source of vocabulary and conceptual background for English language learners. Lee Bennett Hopkins has several collections of poems ideal for English language learners with beginning language proficiency. For example, his books of poems such as **Blast Off! Poems About Space**

(1995), **Dino-Roars** (1999), and **Sports! Sports! Sports!** (1999) all provide simple poems with strong rhyme and imagery ideal for the English language learner. Teachers can use poetry to introduce a unit or lesson and its concepts or weave poetry throughout a thematic or interdisciplinary study. For a thematic unit on weather, for instance, there are countless poetry collections such as Leland Jacobs' collection, **Just Around the Corner: Poems About the Seasons** (1993), David Booth's anthology, **Voices On The Wind: Poems For All Seasons** (1990), Myra Cohn Livingston's **A Circle Of Seasons** (1982), or Jane Yolen's collection **Snow, Snow: Winter Poems For Children** (1998).

Poems with similar formats

Collections of poems gathered because of their similar form can help the teacher provide multiple models of one kind of poem. **Splish Splash** (Graham, 1994), for example, is a poetry book of only concrete (or shape) poems. Each poem is another example of the same concept—that a poem can look on the page like the object it describes. Other examples of concrete poetry include **Concrete Is Not Always Hard** (Pilon, 1972), **Seeing Things** (Froman, 1974), and **Walking Talking Words** (Sherman, 1980). In addition, collections of haiku (**The Mood Of The Earth**, Atwood, 1971) or limericks (**The Book Of Pigericks**, Lobel, 1983) or free verse (**All The Small Poems**, Worth, 1987) help the English language learner look at several examples of the same form of poem all in one place. Highlighting poems with a common format naturally leads English language learners to the next step, trying their hands at writing poetry.

Mother Goose poems and nursery rhymes

There are "Mother Goose" traditions of simple songs and rhymes in every culture, and gradually many of these are making their way into book form, such as **Arroz Con Leche: Popular Songs And Rhymes From Latin American** (Delacre, 1989) and **Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes** (Wyndham, 1998). Although English language learners need some exposure to the classic European verses of "Jack and Jill," "Humpty Dumpty," and others, it may be even more fascinating to invite English language learners to share and collect the "Mother Goose" verses of their own cultures. This could even be a family or community project, with parents as guest poets, and English language

learners working together to put these verses on paper and perhaps on tape.

Individual collections by poets

Poetry also comes in the form of works by individual poets. Krashen and Terrell (1983) note the benefits of using several works (or collections of poems) by one author. They argue that such "narrow reading" helps English language learners due to the familiar authorial style. **Where the Sidewalk Ends** (Silverstein, 1974) is probably the most well known example of an individual collection by a poet. Such "standards" by Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky, and Judith Viorst are readily available, and these are the poets often voted upon by children as their favorites (Kutiper and Wilson, 1993). However, "new" writers are gaining in popularity, too, such as Kalli Dakos, Douglas Florian, and Naomi Shihab Nye. With Douglas Florian, for example, students will discover he is both a poet and an artist who enjoys word play and formula poems. Many of his works provide opportunities for talking about the English language and the borrowing and coining of words. If you have to choose just one title by Douglas Florian, **Bing, Bang, Boing** (1994) might be the best buy. Although it doesn't have the lush, colorful illustrations of his shorter picture book anthologies, it is jam-packed full of rhythmic, humorous, appealing poetry that works well with nearly all proficiency and grade levels.

Having available a selection of books by differing authors, English language learners can become acquainted with the vast array of possibilities within the genre of poetry. In addition, they are discovering their new language in an understandable and meaningful context.

HOW DO TEACHERS SHARE AND INVOLVE STUDENTS WITH POETRY?

Just as there are a variety of poetry books, there are countless methods of engaging students with poetry and with its rhythmic language. We will highlight just a few of these noting how these techniques are appropriate for English language learners.

Listening centers

In addition to a set of poetry books, Steinbergh (1994) recommends that classrooms contain a listening center to highlight poetry as well. Poems on tape, along with the corresponding books or poems make an excellent addition to the listening cen-

ter. It provides additional practice in listening and reading, models of effective read aloud, and especially, assistance with pronunciation and expression. These multiple repetitions help the learner to process the new sounds and meanings of the language. Taped poetry also serves as an additional model of writing. Because poems are short, the visit to the listening center can also be brief. When English language learners become comfortable with reading aloud a favorite poem, they may want to tape record themselves reading it aloud, copy it in their best handwriting, illustrate it, and place this poem and text in the listening center for others to enjoy. This can be a source of pride as well as language practice.

Several Internet sites also offer audio versions of poems, including new kinds of experimental poetry. Check out the following resources.

Electronic Poetry Center Home Page for all kinds of experimental poetry, <www.wings.buffalo.edu/epc>

Poets and Writers, Inc. offers audio files of some poems, poem trivia, <www.pw.org>

Poetry Magazine supplies audio clips of individual poems, <www.poetrymagazine.com>

Reading aloud

The first step in inviting children into the oral world of poetry is very simply by reading poems aloud to the class. Modeling is always the best place to start. In fact, Cullinan, Scala, and Schroder (1995) recommend that we read a poem aloud at least twice, although children may often ask for even more. Reading poems out loud to English language learners helps children attend both to the sounds of the words and lines as well as to their meaning. It sets the stage for student participation in the read aloud process. For English language learners, this modeling step cannot be skipped. It familiarizes them with what the words of the poem should sound like and engages their listening comprehension in making sense of the poem's meaning.

As the teacher/model, you begin by choosing poems you enjoy personally and sharing them with expression and enthusiasm. If possible, display the words of the poem on the chalkboard or with an overhead. This is especially essential for English language learners at the beginning or intermediate level of language proficiency. Seeing the words while hearing them is additional reinforcement for children learning to read and/or learning English. A good first poem to share is "Three Wishes" by Karla Kuskin (**Near the Window Tree**, 1975).

Every child has wished for wishes. In this poem, the poet wishes for a good book. Older English language learners may enjoy Gary Soto's "Ode To Family Photographs" (**Neighborhood Odes**, 1992). This celebration of cock-eyed family pictures is even more fun if everyone brings their own crazy photographs to share, along with the stories behind them. A second grade teacher, Laura Turner, shared the poem "What The Wind Swept Away Today" by Douglas Florian from **Bing Bang Boing** (1994). In order to help her ESL students comprehend the poem more fully, she had each student create a picture for one line of the poem [e.g., "a purple leaf (off a tree)," "Someone's homework (graded D)"] to help them visualize the poem's list of objects that the wind blew away.

Choral reading

Once teachers have modeled oral reading of poetry, English language learners are ready to move on to choral reading. Through choral reading formats such as reading poems in unison, call and response, individual solo lines, etc., students have an opportunity to jump in when they feel more comfortable with the language. The interactive potential of choral reading and poetry performance are ideal to build oral language with English language learners. Many poems are particularly effective for an in unison performance strategy, including "Louder" by Jack Prelutsky from **The New Kid On The Block** (1994), in which students say the word "louder" whenever it appears and "Things" by Eloise Greenfield (**Honey, I Love**, 1978), in which students say the line "ain't got it no more" each time it occurs. For English language learners, this is a way to participate as a group with all the other students, in a low pressure setting because all voices blend together. It can be helpful to write the word or phrase on a strip of paper and lift it high, as a visual cue, when students have their turn.

Using multiple small groups is the next step in bringing poems to life with choral reading. Obviously this puts the focus on fewer students; thus, it may take more practice. However, when English language learners have participated in unison and large group read alouds, this is not usually a problem. Try, Janet Wong's "Face It" (**A Suitcase Of Seaweed**, 1996) with three stanzas that reflect the writer's musings on her nose, her eyes, and her mouth and how each represents a different part of her identity. Three groups could each read a different stanza, using motions to point to each body

part in turn. As another option, try "The Question" by Karla Kuskin (**Dogs And Dragons, Trees And Dreams**, 1980), a poem that poses multiple answers to the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Different student groups can each pipe in with a different answer, "I think I'd like to be the sky," "Or be a plane or train or mouse," "Or maybe a haunted house," "Or something furry, rough and wild . . .," "Or maybe I will stay a child." If English language learners can participate with a small group or a partner for their given lines, they generally feel more secure in participating in this oral exercise.

Some poems are list-like in their structure and these work well for what is sometimes called "linearound" choral reading in which individual voices read individual lines. After English language learners have participated in group variations, most are usually eager to volunteer to read a line solo. However, be sure the poem is familiar before students volunteer for individual lines. Always begin by reading the poem aloud to them. Language learners feel especially vulnerable about mispronouncing words or messing up the timing. Students might try "What If?" by Shel Silverstein (**A Light In The Attic**, 1981) with each 'what-if worry' read by a different voice:

"Whatif I'm dumb in school?
Whatif they've closed the swimming pool?
Whatif I get beat up?
Whatif there's poison in my cup?"

One kindergarten teacher used Douglas Florian's "Delicious Wishes" (**Bing, Bang, Boing**, 1994) with each child taking a different wish (e.g., "I wish I could whistle") to read and act out. For an informal evaluation, she watched to see if the students were able to act out the new vocabulary as they recited their lines. This poem also allowed her Hispanic ESL students to practice the difficult 'sh' sound that can prove so problematic to Spanish speakers.

Creative dramatics

Beyond reading the poem, the class can add actions for the words. "One first grade class performed a poem using silent movements, and the rest of the class guessed which poem they were performing" (Heard, 1999, p.13). Barbara Chatton challenges us to consider adding pantomime, sound effects, and background music. English language learners may want to adapt their favorite poems to

rap, chants, or (cheerleading) yells and use puppets, props, gestures, or clapping. Alma Flor Ada, Violet Harris, and Lee Bennett Hopkins, in their anthology, **A Chorus Of Cultures** (1993), suggest that “physical involvement puts children at ease and encourages listening comprehension” and that “representing the actions of a poem, the feelings in the poem, allowing even for silent participation, especially for children acquiring English” is essential to their language learning. Indeed, this linking of language and action is the foundation of the very popular ESL instructional method, Total Physical Response (Asher, 1982). Many poems lend themselves to acting out or highlighting vocabulary. Shel Silverstein’s “Boa Constrictor” from **Where The Sidewalk Ends** (1974) focuses on body parts, and Douglas Florian’s “The Bully” from **Bing Bang Boing** (1994) provides numerous action phrases. A kindergarten teacher, Amelia Harden, had students make monster masks out of paper plates to use as they acted out monster motions to accompany the oral reading of “A Monster’s Day,” a poem by Douglas Florian from **Monster Motel** (1994).

As can be seen from this brief list of suggestions for sharing poems and involving English language learners in this genre, poetry affords many possibilities for language development. Through the use of poetry, English language learners are able to hear their new language modeled in an understandable and meaningful format.

CONCLUSION

Poetry has many benefits for students, in general, and English language learners, in particular. Its repetition, rhythm, and rhyme make it easily readable for beginning readers. Plus, it serves as a wonderful tool for introducing concepts and content across the curriculum. Teachers create an inviting, poetry-friendly environment through selecting an inviting classroom poetry library that includes anthologies, collections on single topics or by individual authors, and picture book versions of single poems. Such works are most effective for English language learners when accompanied by a listening center where students not only listen, but also record their own poetry. Finally, poetry can be shared through numerous techniques including: read aloud, choral reading, and creative dramatics, to name just a few. Such approaches reinforce students’ language development as well as exposing English language learners to a broad range of authors, topics, and poetic formats. In summary,

poetry offers a bridge from culture to culture, language to language. So, as poet, Rita Dove (1999, “The First Book” from **On the Bus with Rosa Parks: Poems**) notes, “dig in, you’ll never reach bottom.”

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