Poetry from the heart

AIDEN YEH

Task-based classroom work in Taiwan that uses a mix of traditional teaching, multimedia, and online video

IN THIS paper, I discuss how poetry can be used as a topic of discussion and the basis for a task-based project for university students who have had little exposure to American poetry. The use of multimedia and online video as tools in the course of this project is also discussed and attention is likewise given to student feedback on a questionnaire administered online. Students' critical reflections and subjective analyses of their performances and their feelings toward the project reveal positive results, allowing me to conclude that the integration of poetry into language-teaching work, if delivered effectively, can hone students' thinking, reading, listening, writing, speaking and analytical skills. It is not only the amount of hard work that matters, but how far the imagination is stretched.

Introduction: Why poetry?

Many universities in Taiwan have been offering literature as a subject of foreign language [FL] study for several years. Literature is a broad subject that covers stories, poems, and plays, especially those that are considered to have value as art and not just entertainment. Although literature acts as a window to understanding the culture of the target language, many FL students are overwhelmed with the technical terms and linguistic expressions, not to mention lack of knowledge about the social context in which many literary pieces are often focused on (Finch, 2003). Will it ever be possible that FL students look at poetry with interest, without the fear of getting lost in translation, with a simple appreciation of the texts and an interpretation that requires an understanding of their true selves? This article reports the outcomes of initiating a classroom project, entitled 'Poetry from the Heart', in which the students had the opportunity to look into poetry at a personal level.

Poetry formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience, chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm (cf. Merriam-Webster Online). It is, therefore, in the beauty of expression that makes any written texts likened to poetry. Since poetry is a form of literature, it is necessary to discuss the reasons for using it in a language classroom. Why use literature? The website <onestopenglish.com> (2004) offers many good reasons, of which these are a few:

- Literature is authentic material.
- Literature encourages interaction.
- Literature expands language awareness (cf. Widdowson 1975; Lazar 1993).
- Literature educates the whole person.
- Literature is motivating.

Carter and Long (1991) and Lazar (1993) suggest different models for teaching literature to ESL/EFL students. The three models below are taken from <onestopenglish.com>:

1 The *cultural model* views a literary text as a product. This means that it is treated as a

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source of information about the target culture and examines the social, political and historical background to texts, literary movements and genres.

2 The *language model* aims to be more learner-centred. As learners proceed through a text, they pay attention to the way language is used. They come to grips with the meaning and increase their general awareness of English.

3 The *personal growth model* is also a process-based approach and seeks to be even more learner-centred. It encourages learners to draw on their own opinions, feelings and personal experiences, and aims for interaction between the text and the reader in English, helping make the language more memorable. This model recognizes the immense power that literature can have to move people and attempts to use that in the classroom.

The nature of the project

Following the three above models, this project had its primary focus on answering three distinct research questions:

1 How effective is the use of poetry as a theme for a task-based activity in increasing the students' level of poetic awareness and in heightening their understanding of inner self?

2 What are the benefits of using multimedia and online video materials as tools for enhancing listening skills and in setting an example for students to assist them in searching and presenting their chosen material?

3 What are the difficulties that students encounter and their ramifications in terms of the students' performance?

Twenty-two fourth-year foreign-language students enrolled in the Advanced Listening and Speaking course at National Kaohsiung First University of Science and Technology in Southern Taiwan, and this study was conducted as a classroom activity during the first semester of the school year 2003. The activities were carefully allocated for the 3-hour class and spread out to two class meetings.

I chose a short and simple yet profound four-stanza poem entitled 'We Real Cool: The Pool Players – Seven at the Golden Shovel', from *The Bean Eaters* by Gwendolyn Brooks (published by Harpers in 1960):

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

This poem was chosen, out of the many wonderful poems available at <favoritepoem.org>, because of its message and relevance to our society today. Simms (1976) states that the element of bravado in the diction and rhythm has made the activities of the street people seem somehow defensible, and a certain pride in being outside the conventions is conveyed.

In addition, the manner in which the poem is written was very unusual, each line ending with a *We* with a capital *W*, then continuing on to the next line. As Brooks puts it in *Contemporary Literature*, 1970: 'The *We's*, you're supposed to stop after the "We" and think about their validity, and of course there's no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don't bother to question every day, of course' (*Contemporary Literature*, 1970).

So, what is 'We Real Cool' about? Brooks adds: 'The seven pool players in the poem… have no pretensions to any glamour. They are supposedly dropouts, or at least they're in the poolroom when they should possibly be in school, since they're probably young enough, or at least those I saw were when I looked in a poolroom.' The free form of this poem was determined not by its colloquial rhythm but by her feelings towards these young men. Being a black poet, Gwendolyn Brooks' life is also an interesting aspect that can be shared and discussed with students. She was one of the African-American authors who rose to prominence after World War II, winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1949 (Library of Congress, 2002). Her poems are also reflective of black poetry, which she defined as 'poetry written by blacks, about blacks, and to blacks'.

Teaching poetry in the classroom

Before I introduced the poem to the class, I used a 10-minute warm-up activity where student had to do a bit of running. The following is the set of instructions on how to implement this:

- Paste 5 copies of the poem 'We Real Cool' on

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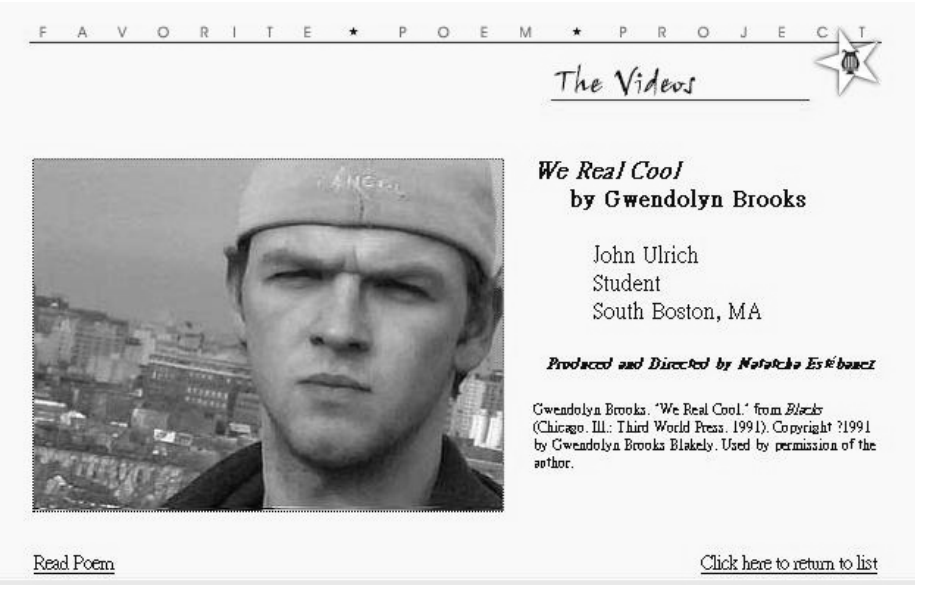


Illustration 1
http://www.favoritepoem.org/thevideos/ulrich.html

the wall down the hallway or in the classroom.
- Students form groups of 4–5.
- Each group assigns a member responsible for writing [what is being dictated].
- The other 3–4 members take turns in running or walking down the hallway to read a passage or two. Students need to memorize as many words or lines as possible. They return to the classroom and dictate what they have remembered.
- The writer jots everything down: exactly the way the poem was written.
- The first group to submit the finished poem wins, and earns 100 points, the second gets 95 points, the third 90, the fourth 85, and the fifth 80 points. The points are optional, of course; you could give other kinds of rewards.

Understanding the text: the language model

As soon as a class settled down, I asked the students questions based on what they could recall from the running-and-dictating activity just performed: questions such as: 'Do you remember the title of the poem?', 'What is it?'; 'Can you remember the first line?' Knowing that the students remembered parts of the text, it was time to discuss the poem in detail. PowerPoint and online video materials were then presented using a computer with Internet access hooked up to a data projector and speakers. The poem written by Brooks in its original style was shown on the first slide. I asked the students to read it based on how it was written, reading the We's softly and stressing the first two words of each line. Then we analyzed the message, looking at the words and giving them meanings.

I introduced the author, Gwendolyn Brooks, showing them a photo available on the Web, at <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/brooks/brooks.htm> and projected slides using excerpts from various authors who commented on Brooks' 'We Real Cool', as well as an interview with Brooks where she critically laid out her point of view. After presenting these materials, the students had a better understanding of why the poem was written in such an unconventional way.

The power of words: the cultural model

To give students the opportunity to understand various interpretations of 'We Real Cool' I used John Ulrich's video available at <favoritepoem.org.>, a website that offers a cornucopia of literary pieces. It also provides video materials of ordinary people reading poetry, and how

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a chosen poem has affected their lives and the way they view the environment around them.

In one video, Ulrich, a white American student from South Boston, Massachusetts was featured rendering his own interpretation of 'We Real Cool'. Although he did not follow the poetic form based on Brooks' suggestion, his expressions were still very much felt. He cites illegal drugs as one of the causes of deaths in his neighborhood. He mentions that drugs have taken a toll of his friends, and that many of them had died. At the end of his video, he takes a positive approach on life and touches on hope and a brighter future for the young people in his community by expressing their feelings and emotions through art.

I then made a short statement about the material, emphasizing the need to look at the manner of delivery and on the content of Ulrich's interpretation. The video was played for the second time, when a set of questions were provided and students had to listen for details and write their answers on a sheet of paper. After understanding the details, a short discussion was conducted where we compared Brooks' writings and Ulrich's video. In the last analysis, I pointed out that Ulrich's interpretation was based on how he found a connection between the words from the poem and the environment and situation that he was in.

Interpreting poetry from the heart: the personal growth model and task-based activity

At this stage, I asked the students to choose or write their own poem, in which they share with the class their reasons for choosing it and how it affects them. This was an assignment, giving them ample time to prepare their presentation materials. Such materials can be in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, web pages, video, or simply by reading a chosen literary piece in class. In addition, the students were asked to submit an audio recording of their interpretations, to be saved on CDs. Marks were based on an oral-presentation rubric which included criteria for content, analysis of the poem, and the amount of time and effort spent on their material (see *Featured URLs*, p.56).

The students' presentations and results

Four students out of 22 wrote their own poems and 18 or 81.8% made use of poems from already existing materials.

A 9-item questionnaire was electronically distributed to students a day after the presentation. The students' feedback provided personal reflections and insights on the process and outcomes of the activity as a whole. The responses were posted to the class's Yahoogroups discussion list, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/listening2003/>. Out of the 22 students that participated, 21 sent their feedback and one did not, and this was treated as a missing item in my SPSS analysis.

The data retrieved was qualitative in nature and the answers required descriptive analysis of the activity. There are three major phases in this process: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), the term *data reduction* refers to the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming written data. In doing this, aspects of the collected data were emphasized, minimized, or set aside for the purposes of categorizing and assimilating relevant information. The next step was to display the collected data in a diagram or matrix that allows an orderly method of drawing conclusions. For the data matrix, I used Microsoft Excel for XP which allowed me to conveniently add items to, or delete them from, tables, rows, or columns.

To determine the frequency distribution and cross-tabulation analyses, the collected information displayed in the data matrix were converted into quantitative data by assigning numbers to each category, e.g. *Yes/No/Not sure* or *I don't know*. SPSS statistical software was used for the quantitative analysis. Since all the sections contained the questions 'Why or Why not?', the students had to provide a brief explanation for their answers.

The first question – 'In what ways do you think this activity proved to be beneficial to your language (listening, reading, speaking and writing) skills?' – garnered a positive response from all or 95.5% and 4.5% for the missing item. As one student observed: 'Our own explanation of our chosen poem is the most natural and wonderful way to express our thinking, and sometimes by paying more attention to other's [students] interpretation gave me ideas to explicitly express myself.' Many students considered that this activity had improved their comprehensive ability because

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they had to understand the deep meaning of the poem. Moreover, many felt that expressing their own thoughts could also enhance their speaking skills. One noted: 'I never had the chance to read a poem aloud; this is a good experience for me.' Some expressed the need to understand the true meaning of the poem, and it is at this stage that they feel it was beneficial to their thinking skills.

Those who wrote their own poems explained the benefits in terms of learning different writing styles. In addition, because the students had to look carefully at the poem from their own perspective, it was imperative to read several poems before writing or choosing one that best suited their own feelings and situations.

The second item in the questionnaire was about whether the pre-student presentation activities (the 'running dictation' and the lecture on 'We Real Cool') helped them in preparing and doing their own project. Again, 95.5% said that these in-class activities had given them ideas on how to do their own presentations. For example:

- '…gave me the pattern for my own presentation'
- '…gave me an example to prepare for my presentation'
- 'I didn't know that a simple poem can be so interesting. So, I decided to find something similar'

In general, the running dictation and the multimedia-enhanced lecture were successful because the students perceived the activity the way it was supposed to be: a good example of interpreting poetry. It also gave the students the opportunity to experience the power of words.

In the third question, 'Did you find any difficulty in choosing/writing a poem or poems? If yes, what did you find most difficult, and why?', 54.5% said that choosing a poem relevant to their personal experiences was not easy. Some expressed concerns about misinterpreting a poem, 27.3% did not find this stage difficult at all, while 3 individuals (13.6%) admitted that, although they didn't find it difficult to choose their poems, understanding them was quite a challenge.

The individual frequency distribution in this category shows that: 3 students (13.6%) encountered difficulty during the preparation presentation materials, while 45.5% said that they didn't experience any difficulty; 8 students (36.4%) said that they experienced a little difficulty, mostly in the technical aspect during the audio recording process. As one student put it, 'The only difficulty that I encountered is the technological problem in recording my voice. I don't have the necessary equipment, nor did my friends. So, I had to ask my friend's friends to help. That wasted a lot of time.'

Despite the fact that some of the students encountered difficulty in preparing their presentation materials, 45.5% felt that they did their best in doing this project, which includes their performance in the class presentation. 'It was easy for me. I merely shared my feelings to others,' says one student. Another student writes, 'I don't think there were any difficulties that I've encountered but I could have done a better job if given the time…'

Eight students (36.4%) feels that they didn't do well enough due to nervousness and stage fright. This, however, does not mean that they did not prepare for their presentation. They were simply nervous about talking in front of the class. Some comments:

- 'I had no problem in preparing my materials. The most difficult part was to express my emotions in front of so many people. It was so different with the information-sharing presentations we usually do.'
- '… my brain can't function well that day, my presentation didn't go very smoothly. However, I think the content of my presentation is O.K.'
- 'I was not sure, but I have made lots of effort preparing for this presentation.'
- 'Yes, I think I did my best because I spent so much time preparing and rehearsing my presentation at home.'

The correlation analysis of the responses for questions 5 and 6 is quite interesting. As regards the three students who said they encountered difficulty during the preparation of their materials, I think that they did their best during the class presentation, while one student states that she did not do her best. Looking at the cross-tabulation data, we can gather that this poor performance can be attributed to the fact that she experienced some difficulty in preparing her materials. In other words, lack of preparation can result to poor performance.

Ironically, half of the 45.5% who did not encounter difficulty expressed dissatisfaction in their oral presentation:

- 'No, I didn't do my best. If I've had more courage, I could have talked more about how Buddhism or meditation influences me…. I'm

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Table: Cross-tabulation count

		Did you encounter difficulty during the preparation of material?			Total
		yes	no	a little, not sure	
Did you do your best in this project?	yes	2	4	4	10
	no	1	3	4	8
	not sure		3		3
Total		3	10	8	21

afraid of what others might think, so I didn't speak out all my feelings about this poem.'
- 'I think that my presentation needs improvement, like I should have put more feelings in reading this poem and talked more about it, so… I think I didn't do best in this activity.'
- 'In this activity, I think I tried my best but it's not a perfect one.'

The statements above demonstrate the different learning styles and personalities of these students. It is common for Taiwanese students to demand too much from themselves and they have a tendency to belittle their own efforts. Being open and courageous are characteristics that are rare among many students in Taiwan. Inhibitions tend to take over during student presentations and greatly influencing their performance. In retrospect, this project has given them the chance to look at their presentation skills, realize their mistakes, and this should eventually help them to figure out ways to improve these skills.

However, 77.3% feel positive about using this activity [poetry] in the EFL classroom and reckon they have reasons to believe that EFL learners can gain something valuable from poetry. Some comments:

- 'Poetry in the classroom is a fresh thing for EFL learners like us; they will learn how to understand the meaning of the poem.'
- 'If we want to learn foreign poems well, we need more practice.'
- 'I think it's a good idea to talk about poetry in our class. I learned that different poems arouse different feelings for different people.'
- 'I like the poem the teacher has showed us in class, particularly the Ulrich video, because it has touched our hearts…'
- 'EFL learners will definitely learn how to make a creative presentation.'

One student, however, thinks that it is all a little difficult for EFL students. She wrote, and I quote: 'Even native speakers sometimes cannot understand the inside meaning of the poem, let alone EFL learners; appreciating poems would be a torture for them.'

13.6% of the respondents expressed apprehensions in using poetry in the classroom, stating that, although it may be interesting, it could still be a challenging task for EFL learners.

In the cross tabulation of questions 6 ('Did you do your best in this activity?') and 8 ('Will you recommend this activity to other EFL students?'), we see that out of the 10 students (45.5%) who were pleased with their performance, 9 will recommend this activity, while one wasn't sure because poetry may prove to be too difficult. Out of the 8 students who feel that they didn't do their best, 6 state that they will still recommend this activity to other learners. Some comments:

- 'Students cannot only practice their listening and speaking skills but also be inspired to write their own poems. If they can write their own poems, that means, they already have attained good writing skills.'
- 'I do recommend this activity because I think it allows us to exchange personal feelings.'
- 'I would like to recommend it to others for it is an interesting activity. A little pressure will make students learn.'
- 'Why not? Though it's difficult, it's also fun! Being EFL learners, we should learn different topics about the western culture and language.'

The optional item was for comments and suggestions, and here are some of them:

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- 'Sharing experiences and feeling to class is good.'
- 'Although, it's difficult to prepare for the presentation, the sense of achievement we got was well worth it.'
- 'In the process, I've read more than 100 poems and now I am interested in reading poems.'
- 'I like it although oral presentations always make me nervous and stressful; it provides me a good chance to practice how to express myself in English. So I won't reject this kind of pressure and challenge.'
- 'I enjoy sharing my feelings to others and listening to other's stories.'

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the potential for using poetry as a topic of discussion in an EFL speaking and listening course, indicating that task-based activities can also be explored as a means of making the learning process meaningful for students. Such activity can both increase the students' level of poetic awareness and boost their motivation towards the use and learning of English – and, most important of all, it can provide a venue for understanding themselves and expressing their inner voice. The application of multimedia and online video tools provides students with the resources and also a vehicle for creating their own projects. In effect, the integration of poetry, if delivered effectively, can hone students' thinking, reading, listening, writing, speaking and analytical skills.

In this project, it is evident that there are certain implications for the use of poetry in the EFL classroom. Some students feel that it is difficult, but also that this difficulty could be the result of lack of preparation. This in turn leads to poor performance, which can mostly be attributed to nervousness and inhibitions about expressing themselves in public. However, those who had prepared well benefited from the project because they felt good about their presentation and were pleased with the outcome. These students understand the degree of difficulty required in enhancing their language skills, and are not afraid to take up the challenge. This could be the first step in overcoming their fears.

The type of literary material that will be presented in class is also an important issue. Its selection requires care and a whole lot of interest. Adequate length, simplicity in approach and a style that does not require an interpretation in highfalutin language should provide a good basis for material selection. However, the level of difficulty will of course depend on students' level of English proficiency. In a nutshell, in great presentations – in both the classroom and the wider world – it is not only the amount of hard work that students put in that matters but how far their imagination can go. As Gwendolyn Brooks once said, 'If you let your imagination go, you'll see we're in for some very lively poetry.' ■

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My Favorite Poems available at <http://www.favoritepoem.org/thevideos/ulrich.html>

Advanced Listening class's Yahoogroups at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/listening2003/>

Students' presentations are available on the Internet at <http://dcyeh.com/sy0304/poem/>

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