

## **Honoring Ourselves, Creating Community Through Poetry**

by [Eimile Máiréad Green](#)

"Language is identity." So said Daowd I. Salih and so many others have echoed this sentiment since. This adage is deeply embedded in my being and guides me in the classroom on a daily basis. Language shapes us. Furthermore, we shape language. Thus, language and culture are inseparable for the successful English language teacher. And, that is why we must look to poetry in the ESL/EFL classroom. Poetry can be used in such a setting to honor students' native languages and cultural heritage, as well as to bridge worlds and create a sense of community.

Current TESOL President Deena Boraie (2013) expresses a crucial truth when enumerating current trends in the TESOL field: "The purpose is not to aspire to become native speakers of English, because we are already native speakers of our own L1, but to focus on English as a means of communication." Bilingual poetry options abound and provide just such an opportunity to shift focus from assimilation to communication.

### **Bilingual Poetry Tasks**

Here are several types of poems that celebrate culture in their content and form, and that can be used to extend intercultural communication in your English language classroom.

#### **Potluck Poem**

In the Potluck Poem, each student chooses a special family dish. The title of the poem is the name of the dish in the student's L1. The body of the poem consists of five simple lines of verse, each line describing one of the five senses accompanying the dish and written in English. Family dish poems are then shared aloud in a potluck-style poetry slam.

#### **Pulse Poem**

Another possibility that embraces linguistic and cultural heritage is the Pulse Poem. This poem could very well become a daily fixture in the EFL/ESL classroom. Each student chooses a word in his or her L1 that conveys his or her current mood. The body of the poem is a cinquain (a five-line poem) written in English about that pulse word. As an added bonus, this poem is an excellent chance to review parts of speech and phrase structures.

#### **Sijo Poetry**

Finally, the Korean Sijo poetry form lends itself really well to a bilingual poetry task. Students write the first two lines of poetry in English by voicing a topic and then elaborating upon that topic. The third line of poetry is the joke or surprise twist written in the students' respective native languages.

While these bilingual poetry tasks are examples of pattern poetry and thus somewhat restrictive and rule governed, poems in the EFL/ESL classroom can also offer a certain freedom. As Gasparro and Falletta (1994) assert, "The use of poetry in the ESL classroom enables students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text without concentrating on the mechanics of language." In fact, Aguilar (2013) reminds us that "poems defy rules." It is this break from grammar drills that allows for English language learners to explore and celebrate without fear of failure.

### **Found Poem**

In a Found Poem, words and short phrases are gleaned from existing texts to create new messages. Within the language learning classroom, this presents an exciting challenge. Students create free verse in a blend of their respective native languages and English. Students are encouraged to bring their own reading materials with them to the class, including books, magazines, and the like in both English and their native languages. These personal libraries will allow students to convey meaning in verse bilingually with familiar, safe language.

### **Group Work**

While the writing of poetry can be made a solitary act, this is not always the case. To be sure, the pure universality of poetry lends itself remarkably well to collaboration, not isolation. Poetry is for everyone; it exists without borders. Aguilar (2013) rightly concludes that “poetry has space for English Language Learners.” Teachers must make a space for poetry in the EFL/ESL classroom.

### **Somonka Poetry**

For an engaging paired activity, partners can work together to craft a Somonka. The Somonka actually contains two Tanka poetry forms within its structure. (Tanka is a form of Japanese poetry that contains five lines with each line containing syllables following this structure: 5-7-5-7-7.) These Tankas serve as lyrical love letters written to each other. Students needn’t write about love for their classroom poetry partners but instead could be prompted to explore in English their shared loves, such as family, friends, or school. Once students have engaged in a successful paired somonka, a whole class poem could be an excellent language challenge.

### **Renga Poetry**

Renga is another Japanese form of poetry; it allows for unlimited alternating three-line and couplet verses. The Renga poem is a highly interactive form because each verse must link directly to the previous verse. So, students practice both reading and writing skills as they craft their own verses and build on their classmates’ contributions.

Too often, language is viewed as a barrier rather than a bridge. Poetry in the EFL/ESL classroom illuminates language, bringing us together rather than driving us apart. It provides myriad opportunities for English language learners to embrace their diverse heritages, to explore English without fear of failure, and to build a sense of community within the classroom and beyond. Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” Let poetry in the classroom empower English language learners to feel limitless.

### **References**

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### **Potluck Poem with Somali L1**

*Muufo*

Hot then pleasantly warm,  
Reach for the charred bread,  
Taste each savory bite,  
As an aromatic whiff of garlic,  
Escapes the crackling pan of oil.

### **Pulse Poem with Urdu L1**

*Goya*

Goya

Fictional, fantastical,  
Wishing, wandering, waltzing,  
The story transports me:  
Willing disbelief.

### **Sjio Poem with Spanish L1**

*Obituary for a Pooch*

Here lies my dearly devoted dog, Fitzwilliam the Third,  
A noble Pomeranian until the very end:  
Comió mucha tarea para su panza chica!

### **Found Poem with French L1**

Je désirais fortement de toucher terre,  
Pour oublier que j'ai honte.  
All that is gold does not glitter--  
We accept the love we think we deserve.  
We are all in the gutter.  
(Aucun secret l'une pour l'autre.)

### ***My Personal Library Consulted***

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky

*L'Objet d'Art* by Jean-Paul Daoust

*Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert

*Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint- Exupéry

*Le Défi* by Philippe Sollers

*The Fellowship of the Ring* by J.R.R. Tolkien

*Lady Windermere's Fan* by Oscar Wilde

**Paired Somonka**

I love you this much!  
To the moon, the stars, beyond:  
Infinite journey.  
My love for you, my darling,  
Defies all geography.

Milk, pancakes, oatmeal--  
I love you more than Sundays.  
Mommy, you are sweet,  
Sweeter than maple syrup  
Poured over our weekend brunch.

**Class Renga**

There is a buzzing,  
Unmistakable in spring:  
It lives in the ear.

Not crickets or bees,  
Nor rustling of leaves.

It's a departure,  
A respite from commitment,  
From the daily grind.

Alarm set for six?  
Lunch box in the fridge?

Grit your teeth for now,  
Sweet relief is on the way:  
Summer vacation!