

## Lesson Plan: Using Poetry to Engage and Empower Students

by [Brittany Ober](#)

April is National Poetry Month in the United States. Many teachers I know shy away from teaching poems, but using poems in class can have an empowering effect on students. Poems are a vehicle for cross-cultural learning and discussion and offer an authentic means through which to practice intonation and thought groups in pronunciation, among other activities. By providing a chart for students to break down the figurative language in poems through paraphrase, teachers can offer students a way to concretely comprehend poetry. Students will also have the chance to experience English language learning in a fun and novel way and still achieve learning outcomes that will help them in more academic genres.

**Materials:** Computer with Internet, speakers, [YouTube video](#) of Alan Rickman reading the poem, [handout](#) (.docx)

**Audience:** Adult learners of all ages, upper intermediate proficiency +

**Objective:** Students will be able to

- practice reading a poem using English thought groups and intonation.
- analyze, understand, and explain an English language poem by paraphrasing figurative language.
- discuss their opinions about and the benefits of poetry before and after the activity. They will also discuss the content of the poem and how they would feel if they wrote or received a similar poem.

**Outcome:** Students will feel empowered and confident because they have read and understood an English poem, which is typically thought of as a text too difficult to navigate

**Duration:** 1 hour

### Prereading and Discussion

Pass out copies of [the handout](#) (.docx) that focuses on “Sonnet 130” by William Shakespeare. Ask the class if anyone has heard of or read Shakespeare before. Provide a brief bio of Shakespeare, and then ask students to discuss the prereading discussion questions on the worksheet as a class:

1. How do you feel about poetry in your first language? Why do you feel this way?
2. Do you think you could read and understand a poem in English? Why or why not?
3. What are the benefits of reading or writing poetry? What are the benefits of using poetry to practice English?

Explain that they will be reading a poem in class and that you want to gauge their initial thoughts about the activity. This will take about 5 minutes total.

### Pronunciation

Have students look at “Sonnet 130.” Assure students that right now, meaning is not important but that the poem will be used as a text for practice in pronunciation. Assign each student a couplet (or line, depending on class size) to read out loud.

Play the [YouTube video](#) of Alan Rickman reading the poem. As they listen to Rickman read the poem, they should mark their parts for intonation and thought groups, or phrases that form a unit of meaning. The video can be played twice if time allows. Answer any additional questions about pronunciation that the students may have.

When they are ready, ask the class to read the poem by going around the room. Read once through and give pointers on any pronunciation features they are having trouble with. Then, read the poem as a class again. If there is a student who would like to read the entire poem for practice, this can also be done if time allows. This will take about 10–15 minutes.

## Reading and Analysis

Begin by teaching the difference between literal and figurative language. Use an example: “Love is a red rose.” What is love literally? What is a red rose literally? (Drawing a picture of a rose with thorns on the board helps).

Now elicit from the class what the saying means figuratively. Why is love a red rose? Why is the metaphor used? Answers I have received from students include:

- Love is both beautiful and dangerous like the red petals of the rose and the thorns on its stems.
- Love can hurt people even if it makes them happy.
- Love is the color red because blood is the color red.
- Love is passionate and angry

Tell the class they will use this kind of paraphrasing of metaphors (a type of figurative language where a writer compares two unlike things) to understand the poem. This will take 5 minutes.

Call the class’s attention to the glossed words at the bottom of the worksheet, page 2. These words are not important to remember in the future but will help them to unlock the poem when they analyze it.

Ask students to look at the chart on page 3 of the handout. Walk them through the first example, which is done for them. Have the students write Shakespeare’s description of the physical feature in column 1, their paraphrase of his description in column 2, and whether the meaning is positive or negative in column 3. Students will work through the charts for about 15–20 minutes.

## Discussion

Review the chart with the whole class. The teacher should give feedback on content, grammar, and pronunciation when reviewing the poem.

After the poem's analysis is resolved, ask students to discuss the final questions in pairs. Review the answers as a class. Again, the teacher should give feedback on content, grammar, and pronunciation. This will take about 10 minutes.

## Final Activity

Now that the class has a full understanding of the poem and the benefits of reading poetry in English, have them read the poem one last time, paying special attention to intonation. You can tell the students to pretend they are performing the poem for someone they care about. The class should end on a happy note, and the students should feel empowered that they can actually understand a poem in their second (+) language. This will take 5 minutes.

Additional assignments for homework may include having the students go home and explain the poem to a friend or family member, video recording themselves reading the poem to further practice intonation and thought groups, or writing a poem to someone they love.

---

***Brittany Ober** has been teaching ESL since 2010. She is a lecturer at Columbia University's American Language Program. Her master's degree in TESOL is from the New School, where she earned an Academic Excellence Award, and her BA in English and art history is from Muhlenberg College, where she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Her academic interests include incorporating poetry and art into ESL instruction and teaching academic writing.*