

Dramatizing poetry in the second language classroom

STEPHEN ELTING

American International School, Hong Kong

ARTHUR FIRKINS

Department of Linguistics, Macquarie University, Sydney

ABSTRACT: Poetry performance is an approach to learning where students can use theatrical techniques to develop a response to the poem. This paper argues that ELL students can explore the aesthetic function of language and, more widely, develop confidence in using English as a communicative tool through the dramatization of poetry. We describe the process we have used to take a poem from the page to the stage and provide examples for ELL teachers to use this creative approach in their classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Performance poetry, ELL (English Language learners), dramatizing poetry, verbal art, aesthetic function of language, drama and language learning, criticism and response.

INTRODUCTION

In order to reclaim the creative in the English classroom, educators should place verbal art at the heart of their English language programmes. Poetry is a rich language resource available to the English Language learner (ELL) and, as such, we argue that reading, interpreting and performing poetry should be a central pedagogical feature of the English programme. Poetry enables the exploration of sound, image and word association while extending the semantic resources available to students. However, current uses of poetry in the classroom more readily focus on eliciting oral or written responses to the poem from students. In contrast, although recognising that some rudimentary knowledge of the language and meaning of the poem is an important prerequisite for its understanding, we suggest that dramatizing the poem can also be a creative and interesting method through which ELL students can develop a response to the poem.

In this paper, we illustrate how teachers can use performance poetry to enhance their students' language experiences in the classroom, improve their proficiency and increase their confidence in using English as a tool for communication. We argue that the dramatization of poetry promotes the development of feeling for language through fostering creative responses to text through action. Finally, we present a method which teachers can use to teach performance poetry, and illustrate this method through two examples of how middle and secondary students in Hong Kong have dramatized a poem.

THE ROLE OF VERBAL ART IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

We begin by situating poetry (verbal art) as an important pedagogical resource in its own right. The importance of verbal art in extending the semantic resources of a

community has been a central focus of literary scholarship. Importantly for our argument, this work identifies how the aesthetic function of language has a tendency to draw attention to itself. For example, no one type of language pattern could be considered to be characteristic of all poetry, so the usefulness of the study of the language for stylistic purposes does not rest on how many facts about language are accumulated by the student, but on how many of these facts are shown to be significant to the text as an instance of poetry (Hasan, 1971, p. 301). In addition, although the aesthetic function in language is often viewed in isolation from other functions of language, Jakobson (1960) points out that the poetic function (aesthetic function) in verbal art is its dominant, determining factor, whereas in all other language activities it acts as a subsidiary, to the act of communication. Hence, crucially for English learning, aesthetic language is an important feature of everyday communication, and not only related to poetry.

Apart from everyday communication, language can be used to create art through its aesthetic function. So, unlike other texts in a culture, a poem is also an instance of art. This means that, as in other examples of art, a verbal art work – a poem, is an entirely constructed world organized by the poet (Todorov, 1985, p. 133). Hasan points out that in poetry, it is not that there is art, and the job of language is simply to express it, but rather “if there is art, it is because of how language functions in the text” (1985, p. 91). So, too, Roman Jakobson (1960) argues that the aesthetic function of language is a reflexive concern, which places focus on the form of the utterance itself. In poetry, language draws attention to itself, by saying, “notice me, notice the way I see the world around me”. The use of language in the creation of art is reflected in the following quote from Mukarovsky (1997):

What is language in literature? It is material like metal and stone in sculpture, like pigment and material of the pictorial plane in painting....Poetry, does not appeal directly to any particular human perception, but indirectly to all of them (p. 9).

So, we suggest that verbal art is a semantically loaded resource available to the language teacher in which the ELL student can be exposed to the aesthetic function of language. This has, not only the ability to develop a feeling for language as Mukarovsky points out, but also considerable benefits in language learning such as increased fluency in the language and greater confidence for using English as a tool for communication.

Several scholars have pointed to the benefits of using verbal art as a pedagogical resource in the English language classroom, notably Roland Carter (1982a, 1982b & 1985,) who mounts a convincing argument for the central place of verbal art in the language curriculum. Others have pointed specifically to the benefits of using poetry: for instance Hadaway, Vardell and Young (2001) identify its importance in scaffolding oral language; Comeaux (1994) points to the benefits performing poetry in integrating language skills; and Elster (2000) identifies the importance of poetry in developing imagination, interpretation and critical thinking skills.

Essentially, through the study of verbal art, students develop the ability to infer meaning by interacting with the text. In other words things are often deliberately left “unclear” in the literary text (that is, a poem) (Brumfit & Carter, 1986, p. 42). Carter suggests that although a syllabus for the teaching of literature can and should be

justified on its own merits, this should not be confused with a syllabus focused to the needs of ELL students, who are the focus of this paper. Teaching poetry in a second language context poses several additional challenges. To begin with, in the ELL classroom, we are essentially teaching poetry across “cultural distances” – students are drawing on different interpretive frameworks to understand the poem and may in fact read it differently to a native speaker (Hasan, 1996). Cultural distance flows from the variations that exist between cultures and indeed within cultures, the different ways of meaning, saying and behaving which will lead to alternative readings of the same text (Hasan, 1996). Although this may seem to pose difficulties, we argue that it also affords creative opportunities for students to respond to the poem in different ways, which we have found to elicit interesting interpretations.

Secondly, the use of poetry in the second language classroom may be more focused on the exploration of a response to the poem. Long argues that teaching and learning should essentially seek to develop the student’s responses to text, not necessarily focus on “criticism” (1982, p. 42). It follows that any reaction on the part of the learner, spoken, written or through action would be “response” rather than “criticism” (Long, 1982, p. 43). Indeed, there are considerable differences between the meanings of the two terms (see Galda & Beach, 2001; Beach, 2000; Lewis, 2000). By criticism we mean that some process of analysis is undertaken to discover the poet’s original or true intention of the poem, where the critic may assume a particular position in relation to the poet’s stance, comment on how the poem may be constructed and evaluate its standing as a work of art. Galda & Beach point out that apart from this more traditional approach, students can also employ a range of other tools, including drama, to share with others how they have interpreted the poem (2001, p. 68).

By response we mean that the words (images) of the poem become vehicles that jog the students’ diverse memories and stimulate creative thoughts, which students as “the performers” transfer to emotional, vocal, facial and physical reactions. In dramatizing poetry, we believe teachers should consider this to be a valid and welcomed response. In our approach, the development of a creative response through action therefore takes a “front seat” to criticism – the poem being a catalyst of creativity rather than an object for deconstruction.

THE PERFORMANCE OF POETRY

Because of poetry’s rich language resources, its indeterminacy and multiple levels of meaning, it can provide a unique opportunity for ELL learners to become agents in the construction of meaning. Armed with a basic understanding of the text, students can arrive at a new understanding of language as a living, breathing, artistic material. Introducing drama to embody the personal and creative response to the poem rather than privileging a particular authoritative or monologic interpretation of the poem can extend this understanding (Hasan, 1996). Here we need to clarify two related but separate concepts. Performance in poetry predominately refers to reciting the poem, in essence an oral performance (Comeaux, 1994, p. 79). A good example of this is what is popularly known as *slam poetry* – a recognized form of performance poetry popular in America, which is gaining recognition all over the world. Slam poets follow strict guidelines and must perform their original poems individually in a designated timeframe. In slam competitions, winners are chosen by the audiences’ applause.

In our approach, the performance in poetry means dramatizing poetry – an embodied interpretation of the poem. By placing the emphasis on dramatizing the poem, the aim in the ELL classroom is less about an understanding of the author’s exact meaning than on students’ personal and creative interpretation – making use of the gaps in meaning left by the poet in the text. Hence, the student must take an active role in the “filling in” of meaning (Elster, 2000, p. 71). The interpretation of meaning in oral performance is situated, its form, meaning and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes and events, so we need to expect diversity in the dramatic interpretations students develop (Bauman, 1986, p. 3). In our approach to performing poetry, we argue that emphasis on prosody, grammatical features and comprehension, though important, remain “backstage” to the students’ own interpretation and their collaborative ideas of how to bring the poem to life in front of an audience. The performance of poetry through action and voice is in a sense an embodied response as the message is conveyed by means of the student’s own current bodily activity (see Goffman, 1963, p. 14). We have found that students will make use of their different body language, facial expressions, gestures, creative use of voice and movements in taking the poem from “the page to the stage”.

FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE

Whether it is the animated teacher reading a story to class, imaginary role-playing with peers, the traveling troupe of actors that visit the school or a show at the local cultural center, it has been our experience that students of all ages and diverse cultural backgrounds have usually been exposed to various forms of drama. Whether actors or audience, drama intrinsically appeals to all of us because of the freedom that it affords to respond to words in action. Such a goal-oriented engagement with a poet’s words can deepen students’ interest in and understanding of poetry (Wolf, 1990, p. 3). Our performance poetry process of facilitating the students in taking a poem from the page to the stage includes a number of key steps: selection of appropriate poems, reading the poem, forming performance teams, scripting, development, rehearsal and performance.

Selecting poems

In selecting a poem it is most important that teachers consider the level of English competency of their students. Here we enter into the issue of selecting culturally relevant texts as opposed to those which are more distant from the student’s cultural experiences. It is to the benefit of the students that the teachers consider the environment in which they live and their students’ individual experiences. For example, in the urban jungle that is Hong Kong, students live in high-rise apartments, often with extended family members and have little privacy. There are few parks in which to play and students are under a lot of stress to get high marks in this examination-based society. Poems dealing with nature, riding bicycles or visiting grandma at Thanksgiving would surely be lost on them. Selecting poems that deal with city life or other familiar problems would serve them much better.

Having said this, selecting poems for ELL students, which deal with subject matter beyond their day-to-day realities can broaden their cultural and social horizons. Exposure to different perspectives may elicit an eye-opening experience and foster a

new enjoyment and understanding of poetry. Discussion, explanation and understanding of the language can be an entry point into different worlds (Hasan, 1996). These worlds can be explored through drama and may afford opportunities for students to grapple with particular conflicts, dilemmas and tensions, which may arise as students compare their own experiences with those portrayed in the poem (Mosenthal, 1998). In essence, the poet is as much a socially and culturally situated being as is the reader of his work (Hasan, 1996, p. 49) As students respond to the poem as both performers and audience, they may identify concerns, issues or dilemmas portrayed in the poem (Galda & Beach, 2001, p. 70).

Reading the poem

The second step to dramatizing poetry is the reading of the poem. This may transcend (in form and function) students' usual reading experiences, so we suggest this should be a shared experience between the teacher and students. When teachers read poetry aloud, they help children to elaborate the world within the text and connect the word to their own personal experiences reading poetry. It is within this personal world that the student will progress from reading the poem into developing a sense of meaning of the poem based on their experiences. We would also add that hearing poetry aloud, when read individually, in small groups or by the teacher, facilitates reading and the ELL student moves towards making "connections between word and world" (Elster, 2000, p. 72). If a student enjoys a poem based on its shape, the rhythm or music of the choice of words the poet has used, or if the meaning of a word triggers an emotional or personal reaction, then we would argue that appreciation and interpretation of the poem has taken place.

Forming performance teams

In our approach to performance poetry, we advocate cooperative learning. Working in small teams toward a "real-life" common goal (the performance) promotes positive interdependence, as each group member's efforts are required for success. This face-to-face interaction builds positive, interpersonal skills. It has been our experience that groups of two to four students work best. In groups larger than this the effectiveness of individual involvement in the team is diminished. The final outcome of the performance is dependent on the collaboration of all team members.

Scripting and development

The next step we term as scripting and involves the performance teams deciding how to divide the poem into performable parts (characters and narrators). This is preferable to simply dividing a poem line-by-line or stanza-by-stanza (refer to examples I and II). The emphasis in dramatizing poetry is less on "exact meaning" and more on students asking themselves, "How do we bring this poem to life in front of an audience", leaving space to create a new meaning, both personal and real for students and audience alike. Interpretation is a relatively open-ended activity, the limits on which are not set entirely by the text itself but also by those who participate in the text (Hasan, 1982, p. 26).

We should point out that narrative poems such as those in our example lend themselves more readily to performance, as characters are quite identifiable. More

symbolic or allegorical poems may require more creativity and pose the following questions: Is there a narrator? Can an inanimate object be a character and what form does it take?

In further developing this step, performance teams should consider the following questions about the poem: What is happening (background)? Where is it happening (setting)? What is being described in the poem (theme)? and Who is involved (characters)? Other character considerations are:

- How do the characters feel? (Are they happy, sad, nervous, and so on?)
- What do the characters sound like (childlike, old, loud, angry, and so on)?
- What facial expressions and gestures can we use to communicate these feelings?

Rehearsal and performance

The final step in performing poetry is for the groups to “get on their feet” and bring their collaborative ideas to life through movement. It is inevitable that many of the decisions made earlier in the process will be adapted or changed to suit the following basic principles of performing: volume, eye contact and body positions (no back to the audience, blocking other performers, and so on). In fostering theatrical techniques, the teacher can consult a commercially available text on drama (such as Wolf, 1990). Decisions on gesturing, vocal inflections and movement will become most apparent during this stage.

Performance teams should also rehearse presenting the title and author, as each poem performance should begin with a spoken introduction. This further extends the appreciation and learning of poetry and serves as an additional memorization strategy. In our experience, variations in presenting the title and author have included groups speaking them in unison, in the characters they portray in the poem, and in costume as the poet. In our experience, ELL students enjoy this rehearsal process as it affords them gains in English language development and discovery of nuances in the language.

Depending on the ability of students and the amount of preparation time they have, groups should be encouraged to memorize “their lines” and practise until it is a polished performance that all team members and audience will appreciate. We believe that memorization is an integral part of the performance poetry activity because it allows a more focused performance and leaves the students with words of poetry they can recall at will long after the performance has taken place. Wolf (1990) suggests a multi-modal approach to the memorization of poetry that involves “read it”, “write it”, “speak it”, “hear it”, “repeat it” and “perform it”. We suggest a performance day be set aside, during which all performance teams will present their poems in front of the class.

We emphasize that in each of the steps described above, the teacher should remain an active facilitator and not the leader. Each performance team should look within their own groups to draw from their creative resources. Teachers need only nurture this natural process by establishing a productive environment and a supportive community within the ELL classroom (Wolf, 1990). In the final part of the paper, we illustrate

our process of dramatizing poetry through two examples developed by ELL students in Hong Kong.

EXAMPLES

Example I is a simple and fun rhyming poem by Bruce Lansky suitable for lower-level ELL students. A performance team from Chan Shu Kui middle school in Hong Kong followed the process described above to prepare for their dramatization of this poem. Characters are identified in parentheses and actions are italicized.

Example I

(everybody says together)
(mother)

Where my clothes are
By Bruce Lansky

(mother)

Dirty clothes should be put in the hamper
she points her finger at child

(father)

Clean clothing belongs in the drawer
with hands on hips and upset face

(son/daughter)

But it takes too much time and too much work,
moves right hand and then left

So I just throw them on the floor.
points at clothes on the floor

Props needed: A few articles of clothing thrown on the floor

Example II is an excellent choice for higher-level, junior high and high-school students. They respond to this poem because of its simple language, obvious rhyme scheme that gives it a jazzy, musical quality and repetition giving it wonderful cadence – it speaks to their adolescent selves on a social and personal level. They like the references to dropping out of school and being “cool”. Although this poem appears to be culturally specific, the concept of being cool appeals to students in Hong Kong as much as those in the states. The 10th grade students at Tung Wah Secondary School in Hong Kong developed the following script, and although there are seven easily identifiable “characters” in the poem, a performance team of four students was able to perform this poem delightfully by calling on three classmates in the audience to fill in the missing parts. The volunteers were each given a small slip of paper with their lines on it.

Example II

(speaker 1)

The pool players

(speakers 2& 4 together) **Seven at the golden shovel**

(speaker 3)

by Gwendolyn Brooks

Action of the poem takes place around a pretend pool table

(speaker 1)	We real cool. <i>Puts on sunglasses and strikes a “cool” pose</i>
(volunteer)	We left school. <i>Pretends to comb his hair</i>
(speaker 2)	We lurk late. <i>Looks at wristwatch</i>
(speaker 3)	We strike straight. <i>Pretends to hit a pool ball with pool cue</i>
(volunteer)	We sing sin. <i>Says line in singing voice and snaps fingers</i>
(speaker 4)	We thin gin. <i>Pulls a pretend bottle out of back pocket and drinks</i>
(volunteer)	We jazz June. <i>Plays imaginary sax and then says line</i>
(all say)	We die soon. <i>Everyone says line together and then slowly lower their heads¹</i>

We have found that using theatrical techniques to take poetry from the page to the stage has had a positive effect on the students in Hong Kong. This includes increased participation as students become more personally involved in the poetic and dramatic process, including reading, developing scripts, working in teams, advocating for particular interpretations, and directing and assuming different character roles. In addition, for our ELL students, there have been language outcomes in terms of cooperative learning (as students must work in small groups), pronunciation benefits, the honing of listening skills and the development of writing skills through script-writing, all of which are centered in a goal oriented activity. This is all evident because the engagement culminates in an actual, observable performance. As the teacher assumes the role of facilitator, students are given maximum freedom in developing their own responses. For us, we need look no further than the enthusiasm with which the students approach their performance day and the smiles of pride on their faces as they take a bow to their classmates’ applause as evidence of success.

¹ The format above is a demonstration of how the students went through our process to prepare for performance in interpreting and scripting the work. Their lineation differs from that of Gwendolyn Brooks, which is reproduced below.

We real cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

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

CONCLUSION

Performance poetry is putting the creative back in the classroom by placing verbal art at the core rather than at the periphery of language learning. The dramatization of poetry is a valuable and motivating resource available to the language teacher. We have suggested that in the dramatization of a poem, the student is entering into a new world, where things, events and people can be seen anew. We have argued that in the world of the poem, dramatization encourages the student to infer meaning by both engaging with the language and interacting with the poet's world through action. Dramatizing poetry is an effective activity for breathing new life to the language classroom and an accessible way for ELL students to develop a response to the poem.

REFERENCES

- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Beach, R. (2000). Reading and responding to literature at the level of activity. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32(2), 237-251
- Butt, D. (1996). Literature, culture and the classroom: The aesthetic function in our information era. In J. James (Eds.), *The language-culture connection (Anthology Series 37)* (pp. 86-106). Singapore: SEAMO Regional Language Centre.
- Brumfit, C., & Carter R. (1996). *Literature and language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carter, R. (1982a). Responses to language in poetry. In R. Carter and D. Burton (Eds.), *Literary text and language study* (pp. 30-51). London: Edward Arnold.
- Carter, R. (1982b). *Language and literature: An introductory reader in stylistics*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Carter, R. (1985). Stylistics. *Annual Review in Applied Linguistics*, 5, 92-100.
- Comeaux, P. (1994). Performing poetry: Centering the language arts programme. *Contemporary Education*, 65(2), 77-81.
- Elster, C. (2000). Entering and opening the world of a poem. *Language Arts*, 78(1), 71-77.
- Galda, L., & Beach, R. (2001). Response to literature as a cultural activity. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(1), 64-73.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in public places*. New York: Free Press.
- Hadaway, L., Vardell, S., & Young, T. (2001). Scaffolding oral language development through poetry for students learning language. *The Reading Teacher*, 54(8), 796-806.
- Hasan, R. (1996). On teaching literature across cultural distance. In J. James (Ed.), *The language-culture connection (Anthology Series 37)* (pp. 34-62). Singapore: SEAMO Regional Language Centre.
- Hasan, R. (1985). *Linguistics, language, and verbal art*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Hasan R. (1971). Rime and reason in literature. In S. Chatman (Ed.), *Literary style* (pp. 299-325). London: Oxford University Press.
- Jakobson, R. (1960). Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics. In A. Sebok (Ed.), *Style in language* (2nd ed) (pp. 350-377). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lewis, C. (2000). Limits of identification: The personal pleasurable and critical in reader response. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 32(2), 253-266.

- Long, M. (1996). A feeling for language: The multiple values of teaching literature. In C. Brumfit & R. Carter (Eds.), *Literature and language teaching* (pp. 42-59). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mosenthal, P. (1988). Reframing the problem of adolescence and adolescent literacy: A dilemma-management perspective. In D. Alvermann, K. Hinchman, D. Moore, S. Phelps & D. Waff (Eds.), *Reconceptualizing the literacies in adolescents' lives* (pp. 325-352). Mahwah, NJ : Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Mukarovsky, J. (1977). *The word and verbal art*. J. Burbank & P. Steiner (Eds. & Trans.). New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 9.
- Todorov, T. (1985). Three conceptions of poetic language. In R. Jackson & S. Rudy (Eds.), *Russian formalism: A retrospective glance in honour of Victor Elich* (pp.130-147). New Haven: Yale Centre for International and Area Studies.
- Wolf, A. (1990). *Something is going to happen: Poem performance for the classroom. A teacher's companion book*. Asheville, NC: Iambic Publications.

Manuscript received: July 14, 2006

Revision received: December 12, 2006

Accepted: February 2, 2007