

# Reading and Writing Poetry for Second-Language Users: A Form-Based Approach

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## Abstract

This essay describes a course, “Reading and Writing Poetry in English,” taught from 2014 to 2018 at Chuo University. Unlike many other poetry writing courses designed for second-language (S2) students in Japan, this course focused on *form* in poetry over more self-expressive, content-focused approaches. In a content-based approach, students are encouraged to think of poetry as a means of expressing their ideas and emotions (i.e. content); in a form-based approach, the game-like nature of poetry is emphasised, students being taught to recognise and analyse poetic techniques and encouraged to use those techniques (irrespective of content) in their own writing. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, however the formal approach may be advantageous when students are unfamiliar with both English and creative writing. The essay gives comprehensive examples of classroom activities and samples of student work.

## Key Words

English language, reading and writing poetry, second-language pedagogy, Chuo University

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## Reading and Writing Poetry for Second-Language Users: A Form-Based Approach

Modern English language poetry has a deserved reputation for difficulty, and as such may seem an unwise subject for a class of second-language users. Ordinary language, in which the primary purpose is the straightforward communication of information, can be difficult enough to understand. Yet poetry is anything but straightforward: poets frequently wrap their meaning in complex literary techniques that, like codes, must be deciphered before they can be understood. If even native speakers struggle with poetry, then, surely second-language users will find it painfully difficult to read—let alone write—English poetry.

This is simply not the case. Even the most difficult poems can, with some guidance, be understood on at least a basic level. Indeed, once a student has learnt to recognise some poetic techniques, many poems can be understood on much deeper levels. The same is true of the writing of poetry: while much poetry is, of course, carefully crafted and highly sophisticated, at its most basic level a poem can be written with relative ease. Neither mastery of language or literature are required; all that is required is the ability to understand some basic literary concepts, and the curiosity and commitment to apply those concepts to one's own writing. Writing poetry, if presented correctly, can thus provide an enjoyable and non-intimidating way to engage with the English language.

Over the past five years I have taught a one-semester class titled "Reading and Writing Poetry in English" at Chuo University. In this essay I describe my approach to teaching this class, including the specific literary techniques—of both reading and writing—I teach to the students. I also give examples of some of the English poems I have found particularly useful in class. Some of these poems are useful due to their simplicity and the ease with which they can be understood. Others are linguistically complex and difficult to understand, but can provide students with valuable reading experience. Finally, I give examples of some of the poems written by students in my class, with commentary by myself.

### 1. CONTENT-BASED VS FORM-BASED APPROACHES

In many people's minds the writing of poetry has a strong association with the idea of self-expression: the content of a poem (what it is about) is the most important part of it. Much previous work on poetry in the second-language classroom has focused on this idea. If viewed in this way, poetry writing exercises are seen as positive in that they break away from the impersonal nature of much language learning—the rote memorization, the exposure to generic sample passages—and allow the student to become involved with language in a way that engages their subjective thoughts, emotions, and memories. As Henry Widdowson put it, the second-language classroom needs "a kind of pedagogic artifice whereby language is contrived to be engaged with and learned from" ("Context, Community" 713). David Hanauer, building upon Widdowson's ideas, has stated that in his own pedagogy "second language writing instruction...is situated within a process of personal exploration of memory and the expression of personal understanding and insight to other class members" (112). He also describes the benefit of using the writing of poetry in "facilitating [the student's] personally meaningful expression" (106). In Atsuishi Ida's words, such use of poetry "can make a strong connection between language learning and student's daily lives and allow them to understand the core nature of L2 learning—using

the target language to express themselves in the real-life context” (57).

A similar emphasis on poetry as a means for students to express their thoughts and feelings can be found in the work of Alan Maley and Alan Duff. As they put it, a student writing a poem is actually “re-shaping [and] condensing...their own prose.” Writing a poem, they go on, is not necessarily a refined literary endeavour, but can be simply “writing down thoughts in the shape of a poem” (4). Since the primary focus of most language learning is communication, the benefits of this approach are obvious: the creative skills and confidence the students gain through writing poetry can be transferred across into more utilitarian modes of English writing and reading.

Undeniably, this emphasis on creative self-expression provides an exciting new dynamic for the classroom. There is, however, another approach, one which can be both used exclusively or in combination with the approaches just described. This approach has its literary origins not in the expressive poetry of lyrical and confessional verse, but in experimental and avant-garde literatures. While at first such poetry may seem unsuited—too difficult, too obtuse—for student writers, it can in fact enable such students to engage with language in a profound way.

For many avant-garde poets, poetry is not primarily a mode of self-expression—at least, not in the conventional sense. Indeed, much 20th and 21st century poetry can be described as, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, “complex language games” (“Conceptualisms” para. 2), in which “language, far from being a *vehicle* or conduit for thought and feelings, outside and prior to it, is itself the site of meaning making” (*21st-Century Modernism* 9; italics in original). Such poets do not view language as primarily a medium for communication, but rather as a form of game—that is, a system of rules and conventions which can be manipulated and played with.

In my reading and writing poetry classes, I have prioritised this game-like engagement with poetry. Instead of initially focusing upon the expressive, content-based aspects of poetry, I emphasize the technical nature of poetry, demonstrating how students can learn to create original and interesting texts by what Widdowson has termed (in his own analysis of the utility of poetry in the language classroom) “playing with language in literary mode” (*Defining Issues* 124); that is, experimenting with and within poetic form itself. By *form* I do not mean “formal poetry,” in its traditional sense—that is, verse which follows strict rules of rhyme and rhythm—but rather the broader range of rules, techniques, and conventions that characterize, to differing degrees, all poetry. As Kenneth Koch observed in his pioneering work teaching poetry writing to the elderly, “asking directly for writing about love, life, time, childhood, and so on tends to make people’s mind go blank as they search for conventional and general statements” (*I Never Told Anybody* 25). Alternatively, focusing on form tends to overcome such inhibitions.

As the course proceeds, I introduce more material on how formal techniques can be used to express thoughts, emotions, and stories. Student responses to this approach differ. Some continue to experiment with more impersonal manipulations of language. Others gravitate back towards more content-based expressive modes of writing, yet bring to their self-expression the technical skills that come with the formal approach. Thus, both students inclined and disinclined towards self-expression are, as Maley and Duff put it in the context of their own teaching, “transformed from a spectator into a participant” in the English language (9).

## 2. POEMS FOR USE IN CLASS

To accompany their writing exercises, I give students extensive practice in analysing poems by established poets. Below is a list of poets whose work I have found particularly useful in the classroom:

Charles Simic	Mark Strand
Vasko Popa	Dorothea Lasky
Miroslav Holub	James Wright
Richard Brautigan	D. H. Lawrence
William Carlos Williams	Stevie Smith
Adonis	Philippe Soupault
Federico García Lorca	Charles Bukowski
Pablo Neruda	Seamus Heaney
Robert Bly	Sylvia Plath
Robinson Jeffers	

Some of these poets write realistic, down-to-earth poems, others are more surreal. They are all useful in that they use relatively straightforward language and vivid imagery. Several of these poets write or wrote in languages others than English: I use translations which, again, tend to use simple language and clear images. Plath and Jeffers can be difficult to understand due to their complex meaning, but provide good examples of idea-based poetry which, with guidance, can be made clear to the students.

During the course, students must complete several graded assignments involving analysis of poems. These assignments are designed to complement their own creative work, using poems which, as Koch put it in describing his own teaching practices, “would teach them [the students] something new and indicate new possibilities for their writing” (*Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* 9). Once students have become adept at recognizing and analysing the techniques used in such poems, they frequently go on to apply them within their poetry. All of the writing techniques described below are taught through a combination of such reading exercises and extensive writing practice.

## 3. SOUND PATTERNS

Assonance (patterns of repetitive vowel sounds), consonance (patterns of repetitive consonant sounds) and alliteration (patterns of words beginning with the same sound) are common in contemporary poetry. In my classes, I point out such patterns in example poems, and encourage my students to analyse their effect. In many cases, this effect is simply a melodious, musical one. In some cases, the sound patterns can be linked directly to the subject matter of the poem: for example, sibilants (hissing sounds) can complement descriptions of wind, rain, or flowing water, while plosives such as “t” evoke blunt impacts: the fall of a stone, for example, or footsteps on pavement. Once students have practiced analysing such usages of sound, I encourage them to experiment with sound patterns in their own work.

While rhyme can be analysed in a similar way, I do not encourage student to use it in their own poems. In English, using rhyme successfully depends upon the ability to write metrically—that is, to create regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. This is difficult for many native speakers

of English, and is an unnecessary burden for second-language users new to poetry. Furthermore, as Koch has pointed out, “for inexperienced writers, rhyme tends to destroy or at best to dull the qualities that one hopes that form will help create” (*I Never Told Anybody* 28). Students tend to focus upon it to the exclusion of all else, while neglecting techniques at which they are more likely to be successful.

#### 4. COLLABORATIVE POETRY

In order for students to successfully engage with poetry, it is especially important to demystify the creative process. As I have already mentioned, the writing of poetry is frequently seen as something obscure and difficult. In my experience, the best way to overcome this obstacle is to demonstrate, early in the course, how a poem can be written by a group with relatively little effort on the part of each individual student. Again, at this early state, it is important that the focus of the exercise is on form rather than content. This may seem counter-intuitive; surely it is more stimulating and rewarding to write a story or express an emotion than to mechanically follow a set of instructions. The fact is, however, that many students initially feel self-conscious about self-expression. Emphasizing engagement with poetic structure as part of a group activity eases both the pressure of composition and the stress of self-consciousness.

Collaborative poetry has a long history not only in English literature, but all around the world, including Japan with its classical tradition of collaborative “chain haiku,” in which a group of poets would write short poems in sequence, each poem connecting in some way with the previous. For the beginner student poet, this practice is valuable for the way it lightens self-consciousness by shifting the weight of composition off the individual and onto the group. In my courses, I have the students play a collaborative word game called “exquisite corpse” (also known, with some variations, as “consequences”). This game was developed by the French surrealists in the early 20th century as a way to generate strange poems that could surprise even their own authors.

The rules are simple. Each player takes a blank sheet of paper and writes, near the top, a single word. They next fold the top of the paper forward over the word so that it cannot be seen, then pass the sheet to the person beside them. At the same time, they will receive a similarly folded paper from the person on their other side. They then write another single word on this piece of paper (lower down the sheet, in such a way that when the paper is unfolded the two words will appear in a vertical column). This process is repeated five times (if there are less than five players, each sheet will simply pass again through the hands of its original author). After the fifth word is written the paper is passed on once more, then each student unfolds their new sheet and reads the five words.

Each time the paper is written on, the students will have been instructed to write a specific type of word: specifically, *adjective*, then *noun*, then *verb*, then *adjective*, then *noun*. The resultant five words will thus form a kind of proto-sentence, for example:

Red—dog—sing—horrible—peach

In class, I have several students read out their five words. The class tends to enjoy this, as the words are frequently comical in their juxtaposition. Once the laughter has subsided, I demonstrate how the proto-sentence can be easily edited into a grammatically correct sentence by adding a few words and/or altering the verb tense, for example: *The red dog can sing about a horrible peach* or *A red dog*

*sings to the horrible peach.*

Other variations on this game have students writing (again, without seeing their neighbours' work) paired statements: for example, phrases beginning *When* or *If* followed by *then* (*When* the rain falls, *then* I eat breakfast). The surprising combinations that result provide a model for solo work by demonstrating how seemingly unconnected phrases can be made to work together in stimulating ways. This approach also enables the student to view their own poem from the outside. Instead of starting with an idea and attempting to express that idea in words, the student starts with short phrases and attempts to make something—anything—out of those phrases. As the poem emerges from the compositional process, the student must make sense of it, thus experiencing the poem not as a writer but as a reader.

## 5. SIMILE AND METAPHOR

Once the students have engaged in such collaborative activities, I teach them the principles of simile and metaphor. As well as being among the most common elements of poetry, these basic concepts are easy ones to grasp: initially, it simply needs to be explained as a matter of comparison between two objects which share some obvious similarity (a simile does this using the word *like*: a metaphor uses *is* to imply the two things are analogous). The example I most commonly give is a comparison of the sun to a flower—a daisy, for example (“the sun is like a flower” or “the sun is a flower”). The most obvious similarities are those of shape and colour: round shape, yellow or orange colour. A slightly subtler connection can also be made between the visual composition of each: a flower has petals radiating outwards from the round centre, which can be likened to the luminous rays of the sun. From these visual or physical connections, the student can then be introduced to more abstract ideas: flowers are generally seen as cheerful, so can that mood be applied to the sun? On the other hand, flowers at a funeral evoke sadness and loss. The type of flower used, then, will change the tone of any comparison, enabling the poet to add precise nuances of meaning to their lines.

Once these basic concepts are understood, most students can easily write their own simple similes and metaphors. Again, writing prompts should progress from the concrete (“a train is like a...?”) to the more abstract (“summer vacation is like...?”). At this point, the exercise can be linked back to the collaborative writing exercises. A simile can be phrased not in the usual way (“a train is like a snake”) but in the form of a paired statement: “When the train approaches, then a snake appears.” Thus the students learn how the fresh, surprising phrases which emerge out of collaborative writing can also be created by a writer working alone.

Most students will quickly produce long lists of metaphors and similes, often with no thematic connection between them. A good next exercise, then, is to have students convert their metaphors into what I term *expanded metaphors*. In class, I give the example of a simple, one-line simile:

The moon is like a white bone

This simile is interesting, but it is far from being a complete poem. It can be expanded by thinking through the implications of the simile: if the moon is a bone, what about the sky in which that moon

appears? I expand the poem in front of the class:

The moon is like a white bone on the beach of the sky

Next, what is the relationship of the poet to these things? If the sky is a beach, we can develop a metaphor of the poet as someone standing near that beach. What do they experience?

I can smell the salt of the dark sea  
I can hear the surf of space

At this point, I also demonstrate how students can experiment with shape in their poetry. Long lines tend to create a sense of speed and fluidity, while short lines tend to slow a poem down. Lines can either be broken at natural points (where punctuation would occur in prose) or at unnatural points to create a sense of surprise, messiness, or drama. Furthermore, words can be moved around the page in ways quite alien to prose, in order to create visual rhythms and separate out ideas and images. Once I have gone through this process of revision, the poem looks like this:

The moon is like a white bone  
                  on the beach of the sky  
I can smell the salt  
                  of the dark sea  
I can hear  
                  the surf  
                                  of space

As examples of heavily shape-oriented poems, I show students E. E. Cummings's "r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r." This poem arranges words and letters in very extreme ways to "show" the movement of a grasshopper as it jumps (the title itself is an anagram of "grasshopper"). At first viewing, the poem puzzles students: it appears little more than a mess of letters. Its visual meaning can easily be explained however, the jump of the grasshopper being evoked by the spread of text from left-to-right and downwards. It should also be pointed out that the poem as a whole mimics the shape of a grasshopper, its head to the left, its hind legs to the right (for those interested, the poem can be viewed on the Poetry Foundation website).

## 6. VOLTA

It may sometimes be difficult to find published poems suitable to give students as examples of poetic techniques. Poetry is rarely one dimensional, and a piece that demonstrates a specific technique may be difficult for second-language learners due to the complexity of other elements such as vocabulary or cultural referents. While for the most part it is a good idea to avoid overly difficult examples, I have found that occasionally including more complex work can be productive, provided care is taken to

explain those more complex elements. The key point here is that, whatever the complexity of the text, the technique it demonstrates should be relatively straightforward.

For example, one of the techniques that students adopt most successfully is that of *volta*. This technique is an intrinsic part of English language poetry. The word *volta* comes from the Italian for *turn*: in poetry, it means a sudden shift or twist in a poem. Frequently this is a shift in meaning. As an example of this, in class I use Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130," which begins "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun." For the first 12 lines of the poem, Shakespeare denigrates his female subject, comparing her hair to wire, commenting on her unhealthy skin tone, and even mentioning her bad breath. Then a *volta* occurs and the poet expresses his true feelings: that, while he will not patronise her by dishonestly praising her, he loves her deeply and values her for herself.

The poem features archaic vocabulary such as "dun," (grey), "roses damask'd" (roses with multi-coloured petals,) and "hath" (has), however once these words have been explained most students can easily understand how Shakespeare's use of *volta* surprises the reader and deepens the sense of the poet's love.

Many student use *volta* to good effect in their own work. As well as involving shifts in meaning, other kind of *volta* are possible: for example, a poem may shift from a happy tone to a sad one, or change from a realistic narrative into a fantastical one.

## 7. WRITING AND CONSTRAINT

Highly restrictive tasks are also extremely effective in motivating students to new heights of creativity. *Lipograms*, for example, force the student to not only be ingenious in his or her writing, but also to pay close attention to the spelling of words. This technique, pioneered by the French avant-garde Oulipo movement, requires that the poet write without using specific vowels. I demonstrate this concept by having students read selections from Christian Bök's book *Eunoia*. In this book, Bök sets himself the demanding task of writing five chapters, each chapter using only a single vowel. The first chapter, excluding all vowels but the letter "A", for example, begins like this:

Awkward grammar appals a craftsman...A pagan skald chants a dark saga.

(12)

Other chapters feature the following lines:

Enfettered, these sentences repress free speech. The text deletes selected letters.

Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script.

Loops on bold fonts now form lots of words for books.

Ducks cluck.... Surf lulls us.

(31, 50, 59, 80)

Such extreme lipograms are difficult to write, but the process is made easier if students are encouraged not to worry about content at first. Instead, students should simply attempt to string together a sequence of words in a coherent line. Later, phrases can be combined with one another, or with other classroom writing.

A simpler constraint-based exercise is the writing of *acrostics*: a poem in which the first letter of each line spells out a word. I use Lewis Carroll's "A Boat Beneath a Sunny Sky" as an example of this



(each line spells out the name “Alice Pleasance Liddell,” the inspiration for *Alice in Wonderland*. Before explaining what an acrostic is, I tell the class there is a hidden message in the poem: provided they are also shown Liddell’s name, students quickly solve the puzzle). This exercise is an effective way to have students think more about content, in that they must begin by thinking of a subject that can be summarized in a single word. Students are encouraged to use the name of a person (a friend or boy/girlfriend), a place (hometown or favorite place), or thing (favorite food or activity) as the basis for the acrostic. This is also a good time to remind them about different ways of breaking a line for, of course, where they break each line will help determine which word the next line begins with. The important thing here is that unusual line breaks should not be inserted solely to make the acrostic work, but should also contribute to the overall tone or flow of the poem.

## 8. DIALOGUE AND PERSONIFICATION

Now that students are thinking more about content, exercises that stimulate storytelling can be introduced. In my class, I have students do exercises involving dialogue between one or more characters. To demonstrate this, I use Harold Monro’s “Overheard on a Saltmarsh.” A brief, enigmatic conversation between a nymph and a goblin, the poem demonstrates how students can create a story without themselves knowing all the details. It also connects back to techniques of shape, in that each character’s speech is shown not by speech marks, but by the arrangement of the text.

Monro’s poem (which is in the public domain) is available in many places online, however most websites do not accurately reproduce the layout. For this reason, I include the complete text below:

### **Overheard in a Saltmarsh**

Nymph, nymph, what are your beads?

Green glass, goblin. Why do you stare at them?

Give them me.

No.

Give them me. Give them me.

No.

Then I will howl all night in the reeds,

Lie in the mud and howl for them.

Goblin, why do you love them so?

They are better than stars or water,

Better than voices of winds that sing,

Better than any man’s fair daughter,

Your green glass beads on a silver ring.

Hush I stole them out of the moon.

Give me your beads, I desire them.

No.

I will howl in the deep lagoon  
 For your green glass beads, I love them so.  
 Give them me. Give them.

No.

(7)

To build upon this activity, I next introduce the concept of *personification*. Personification is a form of metaphor in which an inanimate or non-human thing is described as if it were living or human. For example, instead of writing “the sun is like a flower” (a simile) the student can personify the sun: “the sun gets up in the morning / and stretches its bright arms across the sky.” Because the sun has been rendered human, the student can extend this metaphor to consider what other “people” the sun might interact with. What would the sun say to the moon, or the earth? What discussions or arguments might they have, what questions might they ask one another?

Some students will want to go on to write different fictional dialogues from their own imaginations. For those who would rather write about subjects from their own experience, though, these techniques can be easily applied to realistic subject matter. For example, a student might personify their hometown, or their pet, or even something abstract such as a favorite hobby, then write a dialogue between themselves and it. In this way, they can express their own memories and emotions in poetic form.

## 9. EKPHRASIS

Such experiments with dialogue lead smoothly into another content-related exercise: *ekphrasis*, or the writing of poems about works of art. To demonstrate this, I have my students read William Carlos Williams’ poem “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” which describes Pieter Bruegel’s painting of the same name. At the same time, I project an image of the painting on the class whiteboard (the painting famously depicts Icarus as a small, easy-to-overlook splash of water, tiny in comparison to the other details of the crowded landscape: students usually take just under a minute to locate him on the screen).

Next, I project images of other paintings. I begin with realistic, representational works of art: Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks*, which depicts four people inside a restaurant late at night with a dark, deserted street outside, is an excellent piece to use. I first instruct students to simply write a poem describing the image. I then have them do several variations on this exercise, such as writing a dialogue between the different people in the painting, or imagining what might be happening outside the borders of the image (who might be walking down the street? Who lives in the dark houses across the street?).

From *Nighthawks*, I move to other paintings (the works of Giorgio de Chirico are especially useful in their sense of mysterious unseen spaces hidden behind walls and doors). Abstract works by artists

such as Jackson Pollock and Yayoi Kusama are also stimulating, as they encourage students to personify shapes and colours, creating imaginative dialogues and stories around them.

## 10. PORTFOLIO PREPARATION

During the semester, each student builds up a considerable body of work. Their final assignment is to prepare a portfolio of their ten best poems for submission in the final class. The expectation is that students will take short poems, or even individual lines, that they have written in class and expand or combine them into longer, fully-developed poems. As they work on this portfolio, I offer some editorial advice on grammar. Punctuation and capitalisation are left to the discretion of the student. As Maley puts it, “poets are constantly experimenting with language: stretching it to test the limits of the meanings it can be made to try on” (105), and what he terms “acceptable distortion” of standard English can be allowed (107).

As part of their portfolio preparation, the students are encouraged to form a theme for their collection. It is at this point that my formal approach comes into alignment with more content-based attitudes towards poetry. As the end of semester approaches, the students will have had extensive exposure to a wide variety of poetic techniques. In formulating their portfolio themes, students are thus able to draw upon their knowledge to make their own decisions as to what kind of poetry they want to create. Some students apply their technical skills to more self-expressive poems, writing about their own lives, memories, and relationships; others go deeper into structure, exploring the more abstract subjects that the mechanics of poetry allow. Some create themes based on daily life, or the cycle of seasons, or nature, or sound, or dreams. Some portfolios are, of course, more successful than others—both in their use of theme and in their application of technique—but many show significant engagement with both the form and content of poetry.

## 11. STUDENT POEMS

I have selected these poems from hundreds of pages of student work; unfortunately, space restrictions have prevented me from including many poems which deserve to have been included. These are examples of excellent student work, and I should point out that I do not claim credit for myself for these students’ achievement: it is each student’s own hard work and creativity that has enabled them to write these poems. The poems do, though, show how successfully they have creatively engaged with the classroom activities.

I should also point out here that, when I used the phrase “personal experience” in my commentaries, I do not mean to imply that the poem is autobiographical. I mean simply that the poem creates a *sense* of being about personal experience. I encourage my students to follow their inclinations: they can write autobiographically if they wish, but they are also free to create fictional persona, or write completely from their imaginations.

### **An Umbrella**

As it rains

They spread their arms  
 And eat us outside  
 Like Jellyfish.  
 As you walk  
 With holding it in your hand  
 They are also moving  
 Through the rain.  
 As swimming in the sea  
 Beside you  
 The cars move with its eye lightening  
 Like a deep-sea fish.  
 While it rains  
 Your town changes into the ocean.

—Takeru Masuoka

This poem is a good example of extended simile. Beginning with the personification of the umbrellas as jellyfish, the poet expands the metaphor to include first the traffic (as other sea-creatures) and then the environment itself (the city recast as ocean). The expansion is particularly successful in that all aspects of the metaphor link directly back to the subject matter: a rainy day. Water permeates the entire poem, just as heavy rainfall can make the entire world seem a zone of water. The poem also effectively uses varying line-length: for the most part, the pace is slow—like movement in heavy rain—while the faster movement of the traffic is evoked by the longer line.

### **Migrant**

During spring  
 Some of the birds  
 Threatened splendid blossom  
 To give them its delicious fruits  
 Their beaks peck their sprig quickly  
 But blossom was lost lonely  
 In continuous high summer  
 One mid-ocean wave  
 Was singing thrice

During autumn  
 Some of the birds  
 Wanted wonderful maple  
 To make friends with them

They quack and freak it uniquely  
 But maple was passing away  
 In long severe winter  
 One waggish west wind  
 Was whispering twice

—Takeru Masuoka

Of all the techniques used in my classes, sound patterning is the one least used by students. In this poem, however, the poet has given very close attention to patterns of sound, creating quite a complex and varied musical effect. Most noticeable is the effective use of alliteration. This is especially effective in the last two lines of the poem, where the repeated “w” sounds evoke the sound of the wind. Also, note the subtler patterns of sound present elsewhere in the poem: the assonance of “maple” / “passing” and “during” / “autumn.” The jarring consonance of “quack” and “freak” is also very effective.

These next poems were taken from a student portfolio with an especially coherent and consistent theme. Everyday activities and places—the weather, doing laundry, the inside of an apartment—are described in whimsical and fantastical ways, creating a blend of realism and imagination. The first poem begins with a surreal pairing of diverse and somewhat fantastic elements, then moves, in the final section, to something more evocative of personal experience:

from **Vision**

When a TV screen becomes thinner than before  
 we get closer to mars  
 and approach to mysteries of the deep sea  
 .....  
 After the end of color bars  
 my face is reflecting  
 How does it change  
 from yesterday  
 to tomorrow

—Kotono Sawada

In the next poem, the poet uses short lines, in short stanzas, to build up an extended personification of the sky:

**Bathing**

When the sky blazes gently  
 The sun takes a bath  
 with a Huge bathtub  
 made of dark marble and golden quartz.

He washes himself  
 with clouds like foam.

Sometimes he becomes crazy into  
 shampoo and taking showers

Then he shuts himself  
 in the bathroom all day  
 forgetting our laundry

after that he appears wrapping his hair  
 with a seven-colored towel

—Kotono Sawada

The familiar and domestic nature of the personification, with its details of bathing and towels, builds up a picture of a more realistic underlying subject: the daily life of a human being on the ground, whose observations of the beauty of a rainbow exist alongside concerns about laundry.

The poem below, also on a domestic subject, shows how space can be used to accompany a shift in focus:

### **The shelter**

My room is under a little roof  
 The curtains are absorbing  
 weariness of the town  
 The TV has a big head  
 that has outdated hairstyle  
 The desk can't grow as my height

When I walk there,  
 the floor squeals  
 like a little monkey  
 Sometimes noisy birds  
 hold a meeting at the balcony

However,  
 when I play video games  
 and watch movies  
 The outside of windows  
 loses day and night

It's like a space ship  
 I fly from  
 the planet of a packed train  
 Far away.

—Kotono Sawada

The three sections of the poem have been arranged to emphasize the volta that takes place in the third stanza: the shift from noise and busyness to the escapist pleasures of leisure.

The next poem, by another student, is a strong example of minimalism:

### **Photographs**

Photographs  
 are far  
 on Mars.  
 If no one answers,  
 the eye is  
 there.

Photographs  
 are dark  
 on the Moon.  
 If no one answers,  
 I am  
 there.

—Nanami Teraoka

The poem uses a simple repetitive form to build up a strange and haunting mood. The repetitive structure allows the poet to string together ideas and images that do not logically connect together: How or why are those photographs on the Moon or Mars? Who is calling? Whose is the “eye”? Leaving the connections unclear in this way results in a deep sense of mystery, heightened by the

lonely connotations of “far” and “dark.” Also, note the sound pattern created by “far” / “Mars,” which brings a simple music to the minimalistic text.

The next poem, by the same poet, makes good use of paired statements (“When... Then”) to build up subtle chains of meaning which create a warm, natural mood. The poem never states its meaning clearly, but it is powerfully expressive on an emotional level.

from **My theories**

When a stream of river stops  
 Then a land is dark.  
 When you fall a key into the pond  
 Then a new star appears

These are theories of my world  
 I like running with you.  
 These are the same as it.  
 These are natural for me.

When a pocket walks in the sea.  
 Then a fish is eaten by gypsophila.  
 When you talk with no one on the way  
 Then breeze blows the leaves

—Nanami Teraoka

The next poem uses personification in a similar way, linking imaginative descriptions of the wind to details from personal experience.

from **The New Hero Come from the Sky**

Strong wind, why are you here?  
 When I talk to you,  
 I remember a platform at night.

.....

...you help society like a fireman,  
 You give us energy like an English breakfast.  
 You change black rain and chill to beautiful sky.  
 I think you are a soft blanket.



You sometimes run fast like a limited express.  
 You encourage me when I stop alone,  
 You are a mother above my head.

Give people the key  
 until wind and sunlight  
 turn clear colors.

—Marina Yamada

The next example is notable not only for its use of surreal imagery and language, but for the variety of techniques the poet uses to create these effects. There is personification (of the crow), extreme variation of line length, sound patterns (“Foolish... Sly wolf”) , paired statements (“Yesterday, I was... Tomorrow, I will be...<sup>1)</sup>), and many surprising phrases that seem plucked from dreams. Despite its surrealism, the poem has a sense of unity due to the presence of animals throughout.

### **Zoo in the Dark**

How much of a tea spoon of snow caught in the dessert?

Man is stamping his food by getting a bit of paper.

Foolish duck  
 Sly wolf

Dog vomiting on the street  
 Crow is wearing a coat in the summer

A cold sweat erupts in the midnight

Lion who doesn't know his real figure  
 A mosquito bites you  
 Crow ashamed of him

Payback to assume another's name  
 Or  
 A ghost of a debt

Yesterday, I was a hyena,

Tomorrow, I will be a dog

I wonder a warm night dew is an announcement of something  
I guess it is the place that a giraffe danced in the air

Peeling off the mask

Work and home is nothing  
I must be me

Today, I will sleep on the sideway.

—Takashi Iwano

Finally: a lipogram. While this form of constraint has always provoked witty responses from students, they seldom are included in the final portfolio: the extreme nature of the restriction seems to limit expansion into complete poems. The following poem is a notable exception. Using only a single vowel, the poet succeeds in linking together a sequence of tangentially linked couplets: cats, hawks and jackals leading into images of rugged landscapes (Alaska and Afghanistan) to end with a vista of trees and sky:

### **Atlas**

A fat craftsman has a black cat  
and smart hawk

Jackal adapts  
hazard, grabs lamp and spark

An Alaskan and Afghan man  
had  
arms and war, fatal fact

Flat land,  
bald grandpa  
walks and talks

At dawn, dark ash plans  
what stars saw  
at a park

—Takashi Iwano

## 12. CONCLUSION

My experiences in teaching “Reading and Writing Poetry in English” demonstrate how a focus on form can be used to actively engage second-language students. Beginning with collaborative exercises in order to demystify the creative process and reduce self-consciousness, the student can then be introduced, step-by-step, to increasingly complex poetic techniques. This system should not be thought of as being incompatible with content-based approaches: indeed, as I have noted, as students become more skilled at formal techniques they are able, if they wish, to write content-driven work. An initial emphasis on form, though, may be more effective in engaging student disinclined to self-expression or intimidated by English.

At the end of the course, after the students have submitted their final assignment, I give them a final handout. The handout begins:

Poetry can be long, complex, and difficult, but it can also be short, simple, and easy. An artist needs to buy paint and paper, a musician needs an instrument, but a poet only needs a pen, a notebook, and a couple of spare minutes to write a poem.<sup>2)</sup>

I go on to tell the students that it is this simplicity that can make poetry such a meaningful part of so many people’s lives. There are poets who write extensively and exhaustively, publishing books and making a name for themselves in literature: there are others who are happy to write for their own pleasure, with little or no desire for publication. I hope—as I tell my students—that, after finishing the class, they will continue to engage with poetry on some level. Even if they do not do so, by taking part in these classes they have engaged, in their own unique way, with English as a living language.

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### Notes

- 1) This "Yesterday... Tomorrow" pairing is based on an exercise in Koch's *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red*.
- 2) At the end of the handout I also include the list of poets given on page 40 encouraging students to read them in their own time.

Reading Approaches for the EFL Emirati Classroom FÃadhna Hyland ADWC.Â 35. The language Experience Approach This approach is based on oral accounts of ĩ the studentsâ€™ experiences, which are written down by the teacher (Shared writing). Students are then encouraged to read the ĩ story. Individual words and vocabulary are ĩ discussed and learned. 36. Methodology 1 - Whole class The teacher scribes an interesting event dictated by one or more student and writes it on the board to build up a text e.g. â€žI went to the doctor yesterdayâ€Ÿ/We went on a trip toâ€Ÿ 37. â€œBreakthrough to Literacyâ€™ â€œ Methodology 2- Individual/Group A commercial version widely used with children i These two methodologies approach teaching reading in very different ways, which has led their proponents to attack each other's approach as misguided or even detrimental to a child's learning. But what are the characteristics of each approach and how do they aim to build the reading skills of young learners? Furthermore, is it really possible to argue that one is better than the other?Â The language experience approach uses a students own language and grammar to create reading materials. In simple terms, they tell you a story and you write it down for them to read.Â It is based on a consideration of schema theory which says that comprehension depends on the activation of schemata. These are pictures or frameworks of a situation which help us to understand the situation.