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Before accepting my first full-time teaching position, I envisioned working in a classroom where students loved to read as much as I did. I pictured students bringing to class their favorite novels and magazines, eager to share what they thought, felt, and wondered about these texts they were reading. Instead of imagining myself standing at the front of the room and delivering lectures, I dreamed of a classroom where I sat among the students, participating in discussions they initiated. My classroom, I thought, would be like a book club, with each member bringing new texts and new ideas into our discussions of how literature can instruct, empower, entertain, and enlighten. This vision may have become a reality if my teaching job had been in an American school; however, I accepted a position to teach English at a private, elite high school in metropolitan Yokohama, Japan.

During my first days of teaching, my students quietly responded to my oral instructions. Though they seemed able to understand my spoken English, they rarely volunteered to speak aloud. So, I decided to try a different approach; I asked them to write short, personal narratives, hoping I might better assess their ability to communicate in English. Their narratives were simply amazing. My virtually silent students were filled with touching, funny, and interesting life experiences. What further surprised me was their ability to tell these stories in written English that was not only error-free, but lyrical and descriptive. While these students remained silent during class, they were able to construct detailed and organized written communications. It may seem like common sense that my students would feel more comfortable with written rather than oral language. They had time

to think, reorganize their thoughts, use dictionaries, and revise sentences when writing their narratives. In classroom conversations, however, students were expected to respond on-the-spot, without the aid of dictionaries, and once uttered, their spoken words could not be revised.

Considering my students' seemingly discomfort in oral communication, I needed to teach English conversation in a non-threatening way. The curriculum provided to me included pronunciation drills, conversational English scenarios, and excerpts from literary works, including Shakespearean sonnets and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. The drills were repetitive; the conversation scenarios did not seem relevant to my students' lives (e.g., how to ask for driving directions when my students neither possessed a car nor a driver's license). All that remained for teaching conversational English were the literary works included in the curriculum. Yet, diving into Shakespeare seemed an unrealistic entry point for these students; the vocabulary and grammatical structures in these texts alone might confuse students. Further, my limited knowledge of Japanese made it impossible for me to explain difficult vocabulary or complicated literary themes in my students' native language. I needed to find a way to make them feel comfortable and confident reading English texts, texts that were written with contemporary expressions, texts that could also offer my students opportunities to practice speaking aloud. With these instructional goals in mind, I decided to use contemporary poetry as a way of easing them into the study of literature.

While there are hundreds of contemporary poems an instructor might choose to study, I selected works by Louise Gluck, Billy Collins, and William Stafford. These lyric poets all write in a conversational tone, relating moments or stories of every-day life. Many of their poems center on themes my adolescent students might find familiar, such as family, love, nature, and friendship. Also, the language these poets use is fairly casual. For example, Billy Collins begins his poem "Print," which describes a framed picture of

a fish, with this straightforward description, "In the dining room there is a brown fish/ hanging on the wall who swims along/ in his frame while we are eating dinner" (17). These conversational or anecdotal poems seemed to be a good pedagogical fit for my students; as non-native English speakers they might readily relate to these lyric poems but find a more experimental style confusing.

Finally, the poems' length was also a consideration. By selecting short poems (less than a page long), students were able to read poems repeatedly and focus more intently on the new vocabulary. These short poems also served as a means for students to practice their pronunciation skills. By listening to recorded readings of the poems and reading aloud the poems together, the students were able to hear English as a spoken language. After a few weeks of poetry study, I was thrilled to see students gaining confidence in their willingness to speak English. They had also learned to discuss and analyze ten different texts. Poetry had allowed my students a means for accessing literature in a second language, giving them the assurance to move onto longer literary works.

A New Classroom, A New Perspective

After teaching in Japan for six years, I returned to Michigan and was hired as a language arts instructor at a school that serviced an urban population. Once again, my perspective on teaching changed. In my new classroom, the students and I were all native English speakers; however, the "versions" of English I heard in my classroom varied. For example, the Latino/a students adeptly switched between English and Spanish while conversing with friends; other students were African American, who enjoyed teaching me new phrases and expressions. After living abroad, I was apparently out of touch with contemporary "teen talk," and my students were very eager to get me up to date. Once again, I was the mono-lingual, mono-dialectal teacher in a room filled with students who easily switched languages and registers. I wondered how I might celebrate my students' diverse perspectives and languages as well as teach them the necessary "content" of my language arts class.

At this school, I was able to choose from several novels to teach over the course of the year. Considering this group of diverse students, I did not want to simply dive into a classic literary text and risk alienating some of them. So, I relied on my research of ELL pedagogy and practical teaching experiences when structuring my curriculum for this new group of students. Similar to my approach when teaching my Japanese students, I decided to begin the semester by using poetry as an entry point to literary study. In Japan, I had found poetry to be more accessible to students struggling in English than any other genre. I wondered, did poetry have the same effect on students for whom English is not a second language? Could poetry be used to help students access and celebrate the various "versions" of English my students used at home? If so, what type of poetry would best suit my new students?

Considering the Student Population

In *Teaching the Best Practice Way: Methods That Matter, K-12*, authors Harvey Daniels and Marilyn Bizar call for classrooms that are "student-centered, experiential, reflective, authentic, holistic, social, collaborative, democratic, cognitive, developmental, constructivist, and challenging" (12). Similarly, Samway and McKeon contend that effective programs for ELLs include "high expectations" for such students, classes in which "language and subject matter are integrated," and support for ELL students to span "the entire school environment" (128). When considering these expectations in conjunction, it seems that both native English speaking students and those for whom English is a second language learn best when they are both challenged and well supported by peers, instructors, curriculum, and administrators.

If an instructor ought to set high expectations for all students as well as provide a learning environment that is student-centered and democratic, how can this instructor ensure the ELL student's needs are being properly met? Similarly, what about the students for whom English is not a second language, but for whom

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academic English varies drastically from the English they use at home? In both cases, instruction ought to be made equitable; however, in the English literature or language arts classroom, the equitable teaching of reading and writing can be challenging. Most secondary English classes do not focus on the syntactic and semantic spheres of literacy, but require students to interpret and make meaning of what they read. Reading and writing in the secondary classroom, then, are complex abilities.

These claims may seem like common sense to educators who follow best practices, but there is solid academic support to delve more deeply into this process. Kucer emphasizes that "All acts of literacy are not equal… Rather, language performance changes as the relevant factors impinging on the literacy process change" (109-11). For my students, several factors affected their literacy processes, including varying cultural and/or socioeconomic backgrounds and differing home languages. I did not want to risk alienating these students or making them feel their home languages were not valued based on the types of texts taught. Instead, I wanted to find texts that would acknowledge my students' multiple social identities. Such texts would need to convey background knowledge and use systems of language familiar to my students.

Why Poetry?
As an instructor who has taught students who find difficulty accessing academic English, I often question which literary texts are appropriate instructional material. While many texts within the Western literature canon may undoubtedly hold cultural, political, and historical value, these texts also may be difficult for readers (particularly non-native English readers) to understand. In "The Power of Literature in EFL Classrooms," Debora Floris notes, "The most common problem encountered in using literary texts is language. Many EFL teachers and students see literature as a hindrance because the literary language is viewed as incomprehensible" (1). Granted, literary texts can be confusing–to understand them, the reader must interpret idioms and metaphors, cultural innuendoes, and authors' idiosyncratic styles. For many of our students, the literature we teach does not employ the same conventions, language, and style that many of our students use on a daily basis.

So where to do we begin? Do we "water down" Chaucer, dive head-first into Shakespeare's sonnets? Or, do we start with something smaller, a genre such as lyric poetry, which still contains the cultural/historical references found in longer texts but does so in a contemporary voice and style? Poetry might seem an unlikely introduction to literature because this genre can be dense and abstract, qualities students might not appreciate or "get." As secondary teacher Linda Young aptly states, "Getting students engaged in poetry can be tough at any grade level. Too often, students don't have access to poetry's power…. Too often, however, students soak up misconceptions and stereotypes about poets and poetry–misconceptions that haunt poetry" (50).

While poetry may be labeled the "tough" genre, I believe the benefits of studying poetry outweigh the fear that students might not "get" it. First, even fluent readers of academic English usually find poetry difficult to understand. By beginning the semester reading poetry, all students are, in some respect, on equal footing. Further, most lyric poems are relatively short, allowing student the opportunity to read the same text several times and truly absorb the language, images, and ideas. Finally, writing poetry can serve as a vital bridge between students' home languages and the academic form of English required of them to use in school. I believe reading and writing poetry not only enriches students' vocabulary, but these acts of literacy also promote self expression, and teach cultural lessons. That is, when students are allowed opportunities to compose in their "home" languages and on topics relevant to their "home" cultures, they become "cultural informants" for the class. Often, these students might feel constrained by the linguistic constraints imposed by academic forms of English; however, by becoming "cultural informants," students construct a basis for meaning making.

Freire insists that "…to speak a true word is to transform the world" (87). When making meaning and sharing their knowledge with others, students are able to transform others' world views as well as the ways in which those views are described. For secondary students, however, being a "cultural informant" can be intimidating. Students at this age do not usually enjoy being singled out, or being made to feel different. To help students see their cultural

backgrounds and languages as relevant and "class-worthy," it is sometimes necessary to bring in texts as examples.

Thinking about Language and Culture

With my middle school students, I was not sure which poems they would find most accessible, so I began this unit by asking my students to bring in their favorite poems. Several students chose works by Nikki Giovanni and Gwendolyn Brooks. I noticed my students seemed to like poems with a jazz-like cadence, so I brought in authors using a similar style, such as Lucille Clifton and Major Jackson. One piece they particularly enjoyed was Jackson's poem, "Hoops," which describes a basketball player as rising "like popcorn," and doing a "half-cocked jump shot" (18). Through reading poems like this one aloud, the students discovered that poetry is performative. In fact, one group of boys transformed Brooks' be-bop era poem by creating a contemporary, hip-hop style percussion accompaniment.

Not only did my students resonate with these texts' words, rhythms, and sounds, they also connected with many of the poems' subject matter. For example, Clifton's poem, "song at midnight," celebrates a woman who is "big," "rounder than the moon," "nonwhite," and "beautiful" (24). These poems were populated with familiar people and landscapes; they created worlds my students inhabited with words my students understood. Such poetry is powerful not simply because students "get" it. Rather, such poetry affirms and celebrates the diverse languages and cultures students bring to the classroom community. In *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, Linda Christensen recounts a similar experience with her students. She reflects, "Bringing students' languages, ancestors, sayings from their homes into the classroom validates their languages, culture, and history as topics worthy of study. It says they count; their language is part of a history that most textbooks ignore..." (109).

Poetry was an effective means of drawing my African American students into literary study; in addition, poetry helped my Latino/a students feel more comfortable in class. For example, while reading the poetry of Sandra Cisneros, I often came across Spanish words or cultural references I did not understand. In these moments, I asked my students of Mexican heritage to serve as translators.

Though initially some students were hesitant to help, they gained confidence after seeing their classmates' and teacher's interest in learning about the holidays and foods the poems described. These students, who usually remained quiet in class, became animated; they were teaching us about themselves, their lives outside school. Christensen describes this behavior as breaking "the pattern of silence and shame that 'correction' without historical and linguistic context breeds" (109). In this poetry discussion, there was no requirement to use a "proper" or "standard" form of English. Everyone could use his or her "home" language, just as these writers used their "home" languages to create their poems.

Stretching Cultural Perspectives

Once students felt comfortable reading poetry with familiar languages and cultural references, I decided to stretch their perspectives. I brought in selections from contemporary Asian American writers, such as Mitsuye Yamada and Li-Young Lee. Because no students of Asian descent attended this school, I was not sure how much exposure to Japanese or Chinese cultures my students had experienced. Before reading this new selection of poetry, we discussed the idea of stereotypes and candidly examined what racial and ethnic stereotypes we saw played out in movies, advertising, and in our own lives. Students also shared their own experiences with stereotypes, sharing stories of injustice, discrimination, and embarrassment. Christenson emphasizes the need to share such stories and stretch students' cultural perspectives in stating, "When they hear personal stories, classmates become real instead of cardboard stereotypes: rich white girl, basketball-addicted Black boy, brainy Asian...When students' lives are taken out of the margins and placed in the curriculum, they don't feel the same need to put down someone else" (7).

This discussion on stereotypes served as an effective and empathic approach to studying new poetry. Students discovered Yamada and Lee were not just writers of required, school reading. Instead, these writers were real people who had faced real discrimination. In particular, my students were drawn to Yamada's poems, "Evacuation" and "Desert Storm," which detail her experiences living in a World War II internment camp. This war may have seemed a distant history

lesson to my students, yet Yamada's memory of being labeled "a minority" and "the enemy" resonated with them. Though from a different generation and ethnic group, she told stories echoing their own experiences. Her poems broke through some of my students' stereotypes and helped them seriously consider how language is used to both degrade and empower.

Poetry as Empowerment

My initial reason for teaching poetry was simple: It was a genre that had worked well with ELL students due to its concise form and limited vocabulary. This experience prompted me to consider using poetry with native English speaking students struggling with "traditional" literary texts written in "academic" English. The results of this poetry study, however, far exceeded my expectations. They changed my perspective on what it means to teach literature. These students had learned much more than how to appreciate a new genre; they were engaging in critical literacy. In *Teaching The Best Practice Way*, Steve Wolk describes critical literacy as

> ...helping children to see the power, the politics, the ideology, and the interests in knowledge, language and images; it means helping children to be critical readers of text, of society, and of 'reality' itself; it means nurturing in children skeptical and questioning habits of mind; it means empowering children to take a lifelong role in what is supposed to be a participatory democracy.... (Daniels and Bizar 137)

After this poetry unit, my students not only "got" poetry, but truly enjoyed reading it aloud, discussing its layered meanings, and relating it to their own lives. Poetry helped them dispel stereotypes about one another and about other ethnic groups. Most importantly, students were inspired to begin writing their own poetry. From that point forward, the poems kept flowing, poems in a variety of "home" languages, expressing perspectives rich in diversity.

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