
July 1996

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Recommended Citation

Pisko, Lisa (1996) "Using Poetry to Develop Emergent Literacy," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol29/iss3/6>

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Using Poetry to Develop Emergent Literacy



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What is Emergent Literacy?

Emergent Literacy is the first developmental stage of reading. Children in this stage are discovering basic concepts about print. Concepts of print include the knowledge of word, phonological awareness, knowledge of the alphabet, and story structure (Gillet & Temple, 1994). Typically, emergent readers are found in preschool through first grade classrooms. Activities such as babbling, scribbling, dramatic play, and temporary spelling are considered meaningful, communicative in nature, and part of an evolutionary process towards intellectual growth (Leu & Kinzer, 1991).

Why Poetry?

Using poetry and nursery rhymes in the classroom creates a natural bridge for oral and written language, yet research has found that it is rarely integrated into literacy experiences (Straw, Craven, Sadowy, & Baardman, 1993.) Poetry exposes children to expressive and descriptive language, demands careful observation and precision, while advancing children's language development (Steinbergh, 1994). Nursery rhymes are characteristically inspirational for young emergent readers. They are easy to memorize, and contain natural rhythmic patterns that invite participation. Many students come to school with the knowledge of nursery rhyme structure. This knowledge was obtained through exposure to hearing, singing, or creating body movements to familiar nursery rhymes such as *Eensy Weensy Spider*. These prior experiences create a wonderful foundation from which teach-

ers can build authentic language arts experiences.

Are there any guidelines?

Deciding on what type of poetry and how to teach it should be based on the interests and needs of the individual students. Parents can assist teachers by filling out interest inventories for their young child. Interest inventories enable teachers to gain valuable insight into their students and consequently select more appropriate materials.

Text for emergent readers should be short, predictable, and repetitive in nature (Gillet and Temple, 1994). Any completed work should be prominently displayed so that the environment is print rich.

When introducing new poems, use collaborative groups. Recent research suggests that collaborative learning, dialoguing, and interpretive communities facilitate the development of the students' abilities to respond to poetry more openly, confidently, and maturely than teacher-directed strategies. Furthermore, students respond more intuitively by utilizing higher level thinking skills, such as inferencing and interpretation (Straw et al 1993).

Lastly, poetry should not be taught in isolation so that it becomes arduous. Instead, integrate it into your theme so that it becomes more self-fulfilling (Steinbergh, 1994).

Listening to and Learning Poems

1. Shared Readings — The key elements of shared reading are: whole group instruction, enlarged text, rhyme,

rhythm, repetition, predictability, natural spoken language, and a memorable story line. Consider an example of a shared reading experience that I have used with emergent readers.

Print poems on white butcher paper and on sentence strips. Place the sentence strips in a pocket chart that is close to the same poem on butcher paper. Using a pointer, ask for volunteers to come up to the butcher paper to point to words in the poem that they think they know. Have a volunteer point while reading the title. Discuss any unfamiliar words. To establish comfort level with the nursery rhyme, sing it as a group before referring to the text. Continue using the poem on the butcher paper and match the oral language with the written language. The group choral reads the rhyme as the teacher uses a pointer to identify each of the words.

Get the students interacting with the text by using the pocket chart. The poem on the butcher paper will serve as the model. Have the sentence strips removed from the pocket chart one at a time by asking a volunteer to get the title, or get one sentence with the word "mouse" in it, and continue this procedure until the chart is empty. Collect the strips and cut the sentences into words. I usually do the cutting to save time. Pass the words out to interested students.

The objective for the remaining portion of the lesson is getting the poem sequentially placed back into the pocket chart. This may be done by referring to the butcher paper and asking the students questions such as, "Who remembers the first word in the title of our poem," and "Can you point to that word?" Next, ask the student who has the first word to place it in the pocket chart. I also make statements such as, "Our second word is *Dock*." I emphasize the beginning and ending sounds, and ask students what letters make those

sounds. I ask the person who has the word *Dock* to place it in the pocket chart. This procedure is continued until the poem is completely reconstructed.

At the end of the lesson, I hang the poem on a clothes line, and put the words from the pocket chart into a labeled plastic bag. During center time, students may choose to go to the pocket chart center to independently reconstruct a previously learned poem.

2. Dramatization / Finger Plays —

Dramatization and finger plays encourage interaction with a selection at a variety of levels. Children focus on the words, and create hand or body movements to convey meaning. As students interact with poetry, they gain a deeper understanding of the content, theme, mood of the poem, and are more inclined to remember the experience (Danielson & Dauer, 1990.) Poems such as *Five Little Monkeys*, *One, Two Buckle My Shoe* allow children to play with language while purposefully addressing a variety of language arts and mathematical skills.

3. Readers Theater — Readers Theater is a dramatic reading of a script that allows students to transform a poem into dialogue form. The emphasis is on oral expression (Danielson & Dauer, 1990).

4. Retelling — Retelling requires that students retell a narrative selection by reflecting on their own personal experiences. Students internalize the elements of the selection, and integrate their personal style. Retelling can increase language abilities, add interest to a narrative selection, and promote a deeper understanding of what is being read (Danielson & Dauer, 1990).

5. Action Poems — Action poems are written in verse form, and provide a rhythmical chant through word choice and meter. An example of an action

poem is *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*. This magical chant invites students to participate by creating patterns with their hands or body, while following the natural rhythm of the chant (Danielson & Dauer, 1990).

6. Role Playing — While role playing, students use literal interpretations to become a character in a selection. Active participation in this format increases the child's understanding of others (Danielson & Dauer, 1990).

Connecting writing

In grades K-2, reading and writing poetry may occur during different sessions (Steinbergh, 1994). To stimulate poetry writing, topic selections should originate in the feelings and experiences of the children (Webre, 1993.) Students should be guided to write about authentic experiences, those that are relevant and meaningful.

1. Collaborative Poems —

Collaborative poems are constructed by the combined efforts of the students and the teacher. Emergent readers enjoy concrete poems. Concrete poems are written in the shape of a topic for visual appeal. For example, if a poem is about a strawberry, the words or thoughts are written in such a way that they form a visual presentation of a real strawberry, Rhyme is not important for this type of poetry.

Let's imagine that you have completed a discussion with your students about a concrete poem that describes a strawberry. It is important to have an example of a particular technique to serve as a model for the students. Next, create a collaborative concrete poem. I will use teddy bears as an example, but you can use any object to do your collaborative poem. Before the lesson, prepare a teddy bear shape outlined lightly in pencil. Pass around several stuffed bears, and

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encourage students to think about their teddy bear. Through questioning and probing techniques facilitate a discussion about teddy bears. As the students respond, organize their words and thoughts into a semantic web. After all responses are written into the web, place the web and the teddy bear shape in the writing center. Students who visit the writing center can write words from the web, or add additional words on the teddy bear shape to create a concrete poem. During center time, the teacher can work with a small group to create individual body poems.

2. Illustrate a Poem — Emergent readers love to explore with color. Have your students respond to a poem by creating an illustration. The illustration could reflect the contents and details of a poem, or the illustration could reflect the feelings and interpretation of the illustrator.

These instructional strategies have resulted in an increase in listening and comprehension skills, while providing my students many hours of entertaining and meaningful experiences.

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Lisa Pisko is in her fourth year of teaching and she is a graduate student at Eastern Michigan University.