A Wiggle of Worms and a Passion for Poetry: A Community Collaboration

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A classroom teacher and a picturebook author collaborate to teach primary-grade English learners to write poetry in a one-week, science-based Poet-in-the-Classroom unit.

Since the introduction of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) and the subsequent shift in schools to an emphasis on informational text, poetry is often relegated to the sidelines. But it deserves better. As experienced teachers and writers ourselves, we were eager to bring poetry into the limelight. Lorian, an English Learner Specialist pursuing National Board certification, sought to establish partnerships with community members. Dianne, a retired bilingual teacher and author, welcomed opportunities to share and write poetry with students. Together, we were committed to the notion that all teachers can use the resources in their local communities to bring accomplished, passionate people into their schools to enhance learning and to provide students with opportunities to explore poetry. With this in mind, we created a one-week Poet in the Classroom experience. This article summarizes how we combined our expertise to introduce poetry to a group of K–2 English learners (ELs), 6–8 years old, in a suburban public school.

We designed a science-based poetry unit for two reasons. First, poetry would provide students with exposure to rich language in the content area. The wide array of poetry and lyrical picturebooks available for our theme, “Plants and Animals in the Garden,” would also introduce students to the work of two of our favorite poets: Lilian Moore and Bob Raczka. Second, language acquisition research shows that students learn English best when content and language are woven together into units of study (Sherris, 2008). This kind of poetry-meets-science curriculum would be as ideal for our EL students as it is for native English speakers.

Project Overview

Day 1: Making Observations and Forming Questions

Day 1 began with a “Twenty Questions”-style mystery box. The live plant inside provided students with an opportunity to practice forming questions. Afterwards, we inspected and identified plant parts using science vocabulary. We shared Aaron Carr’s book, Plants (2013), to reinforce background knowledge. We finished our first day by introducing the poem “Seeds” (https://ccplonline.org/children/songs/seeds) incorporating physical cues into the choral reading to scaffold participation for EL students:

Seeds
Dig a hole deep in the ground
Spread some tiny seeds around
Pat them down - so they will keep
They are lying fast asleep
Rain will help the seeds to grow
Sunshine keeps them warm I know
—Author Unknown
Day 2: Share a Poem and Share a Pen

On Day 2, we moved from the concrete language of “Seeds” to the lyrical poem, “You Never Hear the Garden Grow” by Lilian Moore (1999). As the language of Moore’s poetry (vines, pods, tendrils, unfurl, etc.) was new to students, we provided realia for our discussion, bringing in actual pea plants to show what these words described. Once the students were comfortable with the meaning and language of the poem, we began to discuss its features. The students noticed that poetry looked different from the stories they usually read. It had white space and fewer words that, sometimes, rhymed. These observations would be important, as students would then work with Dianne to write the group poem, “In the Garden.”

Students began by brainstorming a list of basic plant words (seed, flower, roots, stems, leaves) and plant needs (sun, soil, water, rain). They then re-read Moore’s poem, paying attention to the verbs: grow, shove, reach, stretch, curl, fatten. This pre-writing process was teacher-directed, with Dianne holding the pen while guiding the kids to notice specific elements in Moore’s poem that they might later include in their own. Dianne directed students’ attention to Moore’s use of “ground” and “earth.” Were there other words with similar meanings they might use in the poem? One child suggested “sprinkle,” instead of “water” or “rain.” Dianne pointed out how Moore’s use of phrases like “Seeds split” and “Roots… reach” sounded pleasant to the ear. The children learned that the name of this poetic device was alliteration.

Students then composed out loud, following (as Moore’s poem does) a plant’s growth from seeds to roots to stems emerging from the soil. One of the children suggested the words “down, down, down” because she liked the sound of the repetition. This led students to consider using “dirt” instead of “soil.” Dianne nudged. Could they use alliteration to describe the dirt? The children decided on “deep, dark dirt.”

The give and take continued until the group was satisfied with their collaborative poem, “In the Garden”:

In the Garden
Seeds wait.
Rain sprinkles.
Roots stretch and grow –
down, down, down
into the deep, dark dirt.
Stems push earth
Leaves unfurl
reach and curl,
looking for sun.

Day 3: Inspiration from an Unlikely Source—Down Under

On Day 3, we began talking about creatures of the garden, and our collaboration gained even more traction. Because some students had already studied insects and knew about their body parts, metamorphoses, and life cycles, we turned to a creature that the students knew less about: worms. The picturebook, Yucky Worms by Vivian French (2010), provided specific language (earthworm, castings, rings) and interesting facts (worms have five pairs of hearts). These helped build our anticipatory set and generate vocabulary for the hands-on part of the lesson. We recorded “Worm Words” on a chart at the front of the room (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Students collect “worm words” to use in poetry writing.
for writing poems of their own. When the children left that day, though, we reviewed their poems and discovered they were more story than poetry. Lesson plan change . . . tomorrow’s teaching would focus on revision.

**Day 5: PoeTRY—Revision**

Earlier in the week, we had talked briefly about the look and shape of poems, but Day 5 was a chance to revisit those observations and compare them against the poems the students had written the day before. We began the lesson by sharing Bob Raczka’s (2016) 28-word poem, “poeTRY”—a concrete poem that visually models how to revise by “taking away the words you don’t need” (p. 43). At this point, things started to make sense to the students; they noted that their poems didn’t look like the poems of published authors. Could they tighten their word choices, as Raczka’s poem had suggested, while still preserving the images and feelings they wanted to convey? We believed so, and the children got to work, revising, trimming, and adding words.

Two samples, written by students—Thaily, a second grader, and Fiona, a kindergartener—follow:

**Thaily’s first draft:**

I see you wiggly worm.
What are you eating?
Are you eating a rotten leaf?
Are you stretching out?
I see you twisting.
You are slimy and cold.
You have 5 pairs of hearts
and that means
you have 10 hearts.
You are puffy.
I love you!
You are interesting.

**After revision:**

Wiggly worm.
Eating a rotten leaf.
Twisting.
slimy and cold.
Five pairs of hearts.
Puffy.
Interesting.

With magnifying glasses in hand, the students looked closely at their worms (see Fig. 2). They exclaimed. They squealed. They suggested more words for our poster: soft, squiggly, slippery. Amid the shared excitement of the activity, questions surfaced: “Can I measure mine?” “Why is it moving?” The students compared. They noticed variations. Their observations sharpened.

Reluctantly, the students returned the worms to their soil-filled tubs and gathered on the rug. In the last minutes of class, we wrote a group poem, “Worms Are Digging.”

**Day 4: Passing the Pen—Writing Independently**

On Day 4, we revisited *Yucky Worms* (French, 2010), adding more descriptive vocabulary to our chart, and rereading the words we had already recorded. This repeated exposure was important because half of the EL students were at a Basic level of English or below. By working together to reinforce our collected words, we provided a scaffold for students that helped them generate the specific language they would need to write their own individual poems.

Dianne modeled writing a worm poem using the dramatic voice of apostrophe, a voice that addresses something that cannot reply (Livingston, 1991). Students were invited to compose their poems as if they were speaking directly to their worms. This conversational tone offered the kids the perfect voice...
Fiona’s first draft:
I see you pink worm.
You have rings.
Lots of rings
and you have a pointy head.

After revision:
Pink
Pointy head
Lots of rings
Squishy
Mush!

Concluding Thoughts
The students learned more than we imagined possible over the weeklong poetry experiment. By reaching out into her community, Lorian created an experience that engaged and excited students. Dianne brought her love of words into the classroom and cultivated a context that inspired English learners to investigate the physical world and to write poetry. Dianne didn’t have to be a worm expert, but she is a word expert who understands how to capture emotion in writing.

In urban schools, rural schools, public, private, or charter, all teachers can use the expertise of community members as a springboard for writing poetry with their students. In the past, Lorian invited community members into her classroom to talk about topics ranging from geology to adobe. Typically, these visits included expository writing (3 kinds of rocks), and letter writing (Thank you for coming to . . .). Now, Lorian sees these visits as powerful material for poetry. Students still do some of the same kinds of writing they did before, but today, when experts visit the classroom, students do more. They write POETRY!

For Additional Reading

References

Children’s Literature Cited

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