

# “Watch Me Grow!”: Engaging English Learners in Poetry

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Adolescents face many challenges as they pass from childhood to adulthood. There are issues related to physical development, stresses from home, demands from school as well as questions stemming from social-emotional and identity development (Woolfolk, 2015). Such questions include: who am I, what is important to me, what do I want to do with my life? Since adolescents spend more time in school than at home, it is teachers who many times help guide students to explore answers to these questions. The exploration is even more complicated for English language learners (ELs) who must adjust to a new culture as well as language and living circumstances while they are also defining themselves. It is important for teachers of ELs to use strategies that meet student needs in multiple areas of development (Ramirez & Jimenez, 2014). Many adolescent ELs come to high school at age 16, 17, or 18, but with little formal education and little English. They have limited time within which to explore self-definition while still mastering language and course content. They must try to meet all Virginia state requirements for graduation before they turn age 22. Lengthy texts found in novels are difficult to comprehend, so poetry, which still uses figurative language and literary devices but with less text are easier to process.

According to Ward (2013) English language instruction through poetry helps students explore emotions, connect to personal experiences, as well as to think critically through the analysis of words and the concepts they represent. Poetry is a means to achieve literacy development as it promotes student focus on word structure and choice without having to process long passages of text. Herrera, Perez and Escamilla (2015) note that secondary EL students have a need to learn the sound system, semantics, and syntax of English while making learning relevant. This could be accomplished through poetry activities that involve students' first language knowledge, English, and personal experiences.

There are multiple approaches to engaging students in poetry study. However, Ward (2013) suggests that students need models first to help them

understand what is expected of them. To begin this process, teachers should provide students with hard copy examples to clarify the difference between poetry and narrative writing. Through reading poetry aloud that reflects students' culture, language, and interests, teachers can help students understand how the focus on the patterns of word sounds, rhythm, and meter is important for poetry. Once students have explored the examples through listening and reading, they are ready to use specific guidance for writing their own poetry. Students can be especially successful when they are given structured writing activities that guide them in the use of specific poetic devices to include alliteration, rhyming, meter, and figurative language, knowledge that is required in English content classes. Many ELs not only are challenged to read and write in English but also struggle to read and write in their home language. Through interactions with teachers and peers, they begin to use enhanced inferential skills to share their experiences and thoughts in new ways in English (Ramirez & Jimenez, 2014; Ward, 2013).

Engaging ELs in beginning the writing process can be difficult, as the "blank page" looms large before them. An additional strategy to support EL writing may be needed. Adoniou (2013) explored the relationship between drawing and writing. Adoniou posited that drawing before beginning a writing task resulted in an improvement in the writing of informational text once students had participated in drawing the subject of their writing. Adoniou (2013) cites Vygotsky's (1978) belief that drawing is a pictorial language as support for the approach, and continues by noting that the drawing process can be a form of social communication. She suggested this is especially important for ELs as they must focus both on learning a new language and new content, a doubly challenging process. Since writing informational text involves more concrete experience than the ambiguity of self-definition, it would seem appropriate to consider the use of drawing to support writing about life's questions, "who am I and where am I going?," among other questions.

The relationship among drawing, writing, and thinking is found in other research. Visualization to support writing poetry was researched by Eva-Wood (2008) with eleventh graders. Her goal was to determine if student response to the emotion embedded in poetry would impact students' self-understanding, and would thereby improve student awareness and use of metacognitive comprehension strategies. It was posited that poetry instruction enhanced awareness of an adolescent's thoughts and feelings and interpretation of text. Using a think-and-feel aloud strategy, students consistently demonstrated the ability to respond to key words and phrases, visualize images using their senses, and relate text to personal experiences. Many adolescent ELs lack the skills to communicate in English, but

they do not lack life experience or creativity. Utilizing visualization skills helps students tap in on the background knowledge they bring to school.

Further support of visualization was described by Palmer et al. (2006/2007). A series of strategies were developed to support the understanding and use of figurative language for ELs. One of the strategies included enhancing the understanding and use of figurative language by helping students make connections between natural settings and the figurative language. It was recommended that teachers use student-created and concrete tools to build background knowledge such as through the use of art to help visualize connections. A study by Schulz and Honchell (2010) supported the importance of focusing explicitly on real-life experiences in order to teach language. They reiterated the need to build social interaction in an authentic manner, through shared and interactive writing. Ramirez and Jimenez (2014) strongly propose that constructive teacher-student interactions in a validating environment are needed to expand and reinforce learning. In this way, instruction can be individualized so that English language learners can be the most successful.

### **The “Watch Me Grow” Project**

The Poetry & Rhyme spring project, “Watch Me Grow,” (supported in part with a grant from the Greater Washington Reading Council) was conducted at a high school in Loudoun County, Virginia. It provided EL students with an opportunity to plant and observe the growth of seeds as a metaphor to explore their personal struggles and goals. A product of their observations and reflections was a cinquain poem, which they shared with other ELs in class and through the publication of a poetry anthology. Cinquain poetry was selected because it represents a controlled pattern of syllables, ideas, and length. Another product was the creation of an animated video that joined poetry reading with drawings students had made of their seeds’ growth.

The project was initiated in the spring of the school year. This allowed time for relationship building with the students through class instruction, group activities, individual conversations, and conferences regarding academic progress. The students involved in the project were all Level 2 (WIDA, 2012) ELs enrolled in a literacy class. Throughout the school year, an effort had been made to make class instruction relevant to students’ lives outside the school environment and the project was an extension of that approach. The goal of the project was to encourage students to consider personal and career goals, and to explore how content taught in the academic setting would support their plans for the future.

The project began with a discussion of how each student had grown and changed during the school year. Students were encouraged to share their thoughts and then to connect to how the growth of seeds could reflect their own growth and the growth of others. The book, *If You Plant a Seed* (Nelson, 2015), was read aloud to begin the discussion of growth, peer support, and the future. Students then participated in planting cilantro and basil seeds in small starter cups, which were then placed within the school courtyard where sun and rain were available. The plan was to observe, photograph, and draw pictures of the growth of the seeds as they progressed. A particularly wet spring delayed sprouting and observing, which was discussed as reflecting circumstances of personal growth when life does not proceed as planned. However, the time lapse allowed greater study of poetry devices in preparation for reading and writing poetry.

The next phase of the project was to introduce students to analyzing syllabication, and the poetry devices of rhyme, alliteration, and meter. Students were given copies of short poems in English to choose to read. Authors included Shel Silverstein, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, and Pat Mora. After reading the poems, students worked in small groups to identify examples of poetry devices, using worksheets with definitions written in plain English to guide them. Once students could consistently identify examples of the poetry devices used in the poems, they visited the school library and chose poetry books from which to read during the class period. Students were able to choose from a variety of poetic forms and different languages. There were a number of Spanish, Spanish/English, Urdu, and English poetry books, which enabled students to practice their home language as well as English. Several students returned to the library after school to check the books out to read at home.

Once the spring rains decreased, the seeds began to germinate and students were able to take pictures of the seed growth one-to-two times per week. They used the pictures to guide their drawing of seed progression. Students discussed the seed growth with their peers as they drew. Some had never planted and watched a seed grow before, even though they had lived in rural areas in their home countries. The teacher guided the students during this time to extend the discussion about the relationship between the seed growth and their own personal growth.

Once this routine was established, the third phase began. Students reread the example cinquain poems they had already been given to analyze. They then wrote their own cinquain poems to express their own experience of growth and future goals. They were given a format with lines to represent the syllable pattern for each line of the cinquain. In a sense, they were “filling in the blanks” with the words they chose for their poem. This enabled ELs to focus on the topic of their poem while staying true to the cinquain format. As they wrote, they shared verbally

what they wanted to write with the teacher and explored different word options that could fit the pattern while still conveying their ideas.

The culmination of the project took two parts. First, the poems were submitted for inclusion in the EL department's poetry anthology. All EL students' poems were included, and each student was given their own copy of the anthology. They eagerly looked for their own poem, and read those submitted by other students. Second, the drawings were reviewed by Poetry & Rhyme co-director, Matina Banks, for selection as part of the animation that she created. Selected students from the class were recorded reading their poetry. The recordings were matched to fit the animation of the drawings of the plant growth. Ms. Banks met with students to demonstrate the process of animation using *Adobe After Effects*. She also provided students with information related to careers in technology and especially in animation as some students had expressed interest in pursuing studies in technology after graduation.

The project resulted in many positive outcomes. First, the impact on student reflection of personal growth and exploration of career goals was great. Each student was able to put into their own words ideas about their future. Some were able to define career goals while others expressed values that were important to them. They were not yet ready to define goals, but their self-awareness had increased. Second, progress was shown in students' knowledge and use of poetry devices. At the beginning of the project, students struggled to break words down into syllables, and the poetry terminology was unknown to all but two students. Students were unfamiliar with different forms of poetry, and none had ever chosen poetry for leisure reading. Third, none of the students had ever seen their own work published for all to see. None had ever seen their drawings recognized, nor heard themselves reading aloud as they did for the animation video. These were all firsts for the EL students. Each outcome was exciting and reinforced student self-concept, their ability to learn and use English while their first language was acknowledged, as well as to expand their English content knowledge. All this from answering the question, "If you plant a seed..."

### **For More Information:**

Poetry & Rhyme is an outreach project of Silent Fire Productions, LLC. To see this season's video, "If you plant a seed..." (and the poetry students wrote) and other examples of videos created with adolescent English language learners, go to <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvRj-CZ0Y1wrofk3P4zCJyw>.

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