

# Understanding Culture through Poetry: A Task Based Project Using Multimedia and Online Video

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*In this paper, I discuss how poetry can be used as a topic of discussion and the basis for a task-based project for university level students in Taiwan who have had little exposure to American poetry. The use of multimedia and online video as tools in the course of this project is also discussed and attention is likewise given to student feedback on a questionnaire administered online. Students' critical reflections and subjective analyses of their performances and their feelings toward the project reveal positive results, allowing me to conclude that the integration of poetry into language-teaching work, if delivered effectively, can hone students' analytical skills, giving them a different perspective in looking at their own culture and the society that they live in.*

**A**s Allen Pace Nilsen (2002) writes, "Language and society are as intertwined as chicken and egg. The language that a culture uses is telltale evidence of the values and beliefs of that culture." It has been said that the most urgent challenge facing humanity is the development of new forms of community and social structures. Communities may be described by their culture, which according to anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989) "refers broadly to the forms through which people make sense of their lives." These forms include everything from the dialect or language people speak to the way they eat their food, build their homes, educate their children, treat strangers, define gender and sexual roles, tell stories, or write essays. The relationship between language and culture is explicitly discussed in Kramsch's *Language and Culture* (1998) in which she states that the process that language and culture impose on nature corresponds to various forms of socialization or acculturation. Etiquette, politeness, and social manners are some ways in which language, or norms of interaction, form part of the daily rituals imposed by culture on language users. This is culture's way of bringing order and predictability into people's use of language (Kramsch, *ibid*). Holenton

(1995) argues that the language people use relates to their identity as an individual and as a member of a cultural group. In other words, how we view the relationship between our language and our culture determines the way we interact with others. To examine our language, then, is also to examine our values, norms, and standards.

### Why poetry?

Many colleges and universities in Taiwan have been offering literature as a subject of foreign language [FL] study for several years. Literature is a broad subject that covers stories, poems, and plays, especially those that are considered to have value as art and not just entertainment. Although literature acts as a window to understanding the culture of the target language, many FL students are overwhelmed with the technical terms and linguistic expressions, not to mention lack of knowledge about the social context in which many literary pieces are often focused on (Finch, 2003). Will it ever be possible that FL students look at poetry with interest, without the fear of getting lost in translation, with a simple appreciation of the texts and an interpretation that requires an understanding of themselves and the culture in which they are very much a part of? This paper reports the outcomes of initiating a classroom project, entitled 'Understanding Culture through Poetry', in which the students had the opportunity to reflect on their culture and identity.

Poetry formulates a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience, chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound and rhythm (cf. Merriam-Webster Online). It is, therefore, in the beauty of expression that makes any written texts likened to poetry. Since poetry is a form of literature, it is necessary to discuss the reasons for using it in a language classroom. Why use literature? The website <onestopenglish.com> (2004) offers many good reasons, of which these are a few:

- Literature is authentic material.
- Literature encourages interaction.
- Literature expands language awareness (cf. Widdowson 1975; Lazar 1993).
- Literature educates the whole person.
- Literature is motivating.

Carter and Long (1991) and Lazar (1993) suggest different models for teaching literature to ESL/EFL students. The three models below are taken from *onestopenglish.com*:

1. The *cultural model* views a literary text as a product. This means that it is treated as a source of information about the target culture and examines the social, political and historical background to texts, literary movements and genres.
2. The *language model* aims to be more learner-centered. As learners proceed through a text, they pay attention to the way language is used. They come to grips with the meaning and increase their general awareness of English.

3. The *personal growth model* is also a process-based approach and seeks to be even more learner-centered. It encourages learners to draw on their own opinions, feelings and personal experiences, and aims for interaction between the text and the reader in English, helping make the language more memorable. This model recognizes the immense power that literature can have to move people and attempts to use that in the classroom.

### The nature of the project

Following the three above models, this project had its primary focus on answering three distinct research questions:

1. How effective is the use of poetry as a theme for a task-based activity in increasing the students' level of poetic, cultural and social awareness?
2. What are the benefits of using multimedia and online video materials as tools for enhancing listening skills and in setting an example for students to assist them in searching and presenting their chosen material?
3. What are the difficulties that students encounter and their ramifications in terms of the students' performance?

A total of 97 fourth-year English major students enrolled in the Language and Culture course (Class A and B) at Wen Zao Ursuline College of Foreign Languages in Southern Taiwan participated in this activity. There are 47 students in Class A and 50 students in Class B. This study was conducted as a final project during the first semester of the school year 2004-2005. The activities were carefully allocated for the 3-hour class and spread out to two class meetings.

I chose a short and simple yet profound four-stanza poem entitled 'We Real Cool: The Pool Players – Seven at the Golden Shovel', from *The Bean Eaters* by Gwendolyn Brooks (published by Harpers in 1960):

*We real cool. We  
Left school. We  
Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We  
Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We  
Jazz June. We  
Die soon.*

This poem was chosen, out of the many wonderful poems available at *favoritepoem.org*, because of its message and relevance to our society today. Simms (1976) states that the element of bravado in the diction and rhythm has made the activities of the street people seem somehow defensible, and a certain pride in being outside the conventions is conveyed.

In addition, the manner in which the poem is written was very unusual, each line ending with a *We* with a capital *W*, then continuing on to the next line. As Brooks puts it in *Contemporary Literature*, 1970: "The *We*'s, you're supposed to stop after the '*We*' and think about their validity, and of course there's no way for you to tell whether it should be said softly or not, I suppose, but I say it rather softly because I want to represent their basic uncertainty, which they don't bother to question every day, of course" (*Contemporary Literature*, 1970).

So, what is 'We Real Cool' about? Brooks adds: "The seven pool players in the poem... have no pretensions to any glamour. They are supposedly dropouts, or at least they're in the poolroom when they should possibly be in school, since they're probably young enough, or at least those I saw were when I looked in a poolroom." The free form of this poem was determined not by its colloquial rhythm but by her feelings towards these young men. Being a black poet, Gwendolyn Brooks' life is also an interesting aspect that can be shared and discussed with students. She was one of the African-American authors who rose to prominence after World War II, winning the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1949 (*Library of Congress*, 2002). Her poems are also reflective of black poetry, which she defined as 'poetry written by blacks, about blacks, and to blacks'.

## **Multimedia in the Classroom**

The lecture was presented in class using PowerPoint and online video materials which were projected via a data projector. The classrooms used for both classes are equipped with a multimedia console which made this blended learning activity possible.

## **Understanding the text: The language model**

The students were asked to reflect on the meaning of the title, "We Real Cool". Since the word "cool" is colloquial language and is almost a part of the students' lingo, they did not have difficulty in interpreting it. The poem written by Brooks in its original style was showed on the first slide. I asked the students to read it based on how it was written, reading the *we*'s softly and stressing the first two words of each line. Then we analyzed the message, looking at the words and giving them meanings.

I introduced the author, Gwendolyn Brooks, showing them a photo available on the Web and projected slides using excerpts from various authors who commented on Brook's "We Real Cool", as well as an interview with Brooks where she critically laid out her point of view. After presenting these materials, the students had a better understanding of why the poem was written in such an unconventional way.

## The power of words: The cultural model

To give students the opportunity to understand various interpretations of “We Real Cool” I used John Ulrich’s video available at *favoritepoem.org*, a website that offers a cornucopia of literary pieces. It also provides video materials of ordinary people reading poetry, and how a chosen poem has affected their lives and the way they view the environment around them.

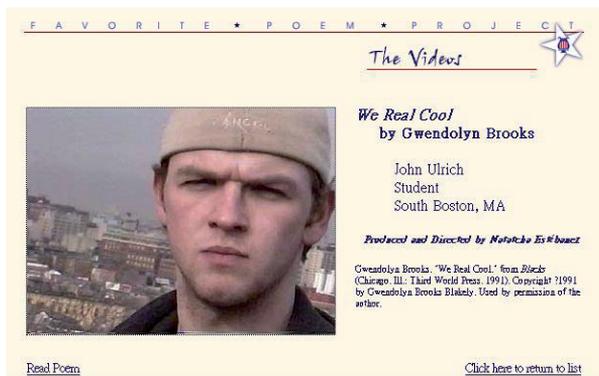


Figure 1. <http://www.favoritepoem.org/thevideos/ulrich.html>

In one video, Ulrich, a white American student from South Boston, Massachusetts, was featured rendering his own interpretation of “We Real Cool”. Although he did not follow the poetic form based on Brooks’ suggestion, his expressions were still very much felt. He cites illegal drugs as one of the causes of deaths in his neighborhood. He mentions that drugs have taken a toll on his friends, and that many of them had died. At the end of his video, he takes a positive approach on life and touches on hope and a brighter future for the young people in his community by expressing their feelings and emotions through art.

I then made a short statement about the material, emphasizing the need to look at the manner of delivery and on the content of Ulrich’s interpretation. The video was played for the second time, and a set of questions were provided and students had to listen for details and write their answers on a sheet of paper. After understanding the details, a short discussion was conducted in which we compared Brooks’ writings and Ulrich’s video. In the last analysis, I pointed out that Ulrich’s interpretation was based on how he found a connection between the words from the poem and the environment and situation that he was in.

## Interpreting poetry from the heart: The personal growth model and task-based activity

At this stage, I asked the students work in groups and to choose or write their own poem, in which they share with the class their reasons for choosing it and how it has influenced them. Students are required to express their group’s opinions about the message of the poem and its relevance to their situation and/or the environment that they live in. Students

are asked to reflect on their (Taiwanese) culture. They had the liberty to choose their own poem, which could be in English or Chinese. If the chosen poem is written by a Chinese author, they were required to present the original work together with an English translation. This task was given as an assignment weeks in advance, prior to the group presentations, giving them ample time to prepare their materials. Such materials can be in the form of a Powerpoint presentation, web pages, video, or simply by reading a chosen literary piece in class. The students were encouraged to be creative and to use their knowledge and skills in their presentations. Marks were based on an oral-presentation rubric which included criteria for content, analysis of the poem, and the amount of time and effort spent on their material (see Featured URLs).

### The students' presentations

The students from both Class A and B were divided into 9 and 10 groups. Each group had 5-6 members. 7 out of 10 groups from Class B presented literary pieces with political and social themes written by local poets; there are only 2 groups from Class A who chose local materials.

### Results

The student questionnaire was developed to investigate whether the goals and objectives of "Understanding your Culture through Poetry" were consistent with the students' perceived learning needs and their attitude toward the activity. An 8-item questionnaire was electronically distributed to students using *Zommerang.com*, a free-commercial online survey program, a day after the presentation. The students' feedback provided personal reflections and insights on the process and outcomes of the activity as a whole. The responses were automatically calculated showing the frequency and response ratio. Out of the 47 students from Class A, 32 sent their feedback (N=32). On the other hand, 46 students from Class B completed the survey (N=46).

Question 3 was a knowledge question which sought to find out the specific materials (computer software and multimedia tools) used in their presentation. One quarter of the groups in Class A used PowerPoint and self-made video presentations using *Windows Movie Maker* while 50% of the groups from Class B made use of a combination of *Macromedia Flash Movie* or *Movie Maker* and *PowerPoint* presentations (see Figure 2).

3. What is/are the materials you used for your presentation. Tick one.		Number of Responses	Response Ratio
Powerpoint		6	13%
Video (videotaped presentation)		11	24%
Powerpoint and video		23	50%
Other, Please Specify		6	13%
<b>Total</b>		<b>46</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure 2. Class B, Question 3

Question 4 was a Likert-scale question used to investigate how the students feel with regards to the ease or difficulty in completing the project. From Class B, 4% said the project was relatively easy, another 4% said it was very difficult, 20% thought it was difficult, while 65% believed it was a little difficult. From Class A, 28% felt that the project was difficult, 63% felt that it was a little difficult, and only 3% from Class A felt that it is easy.

Question 5 sought to identify the problems that the students perceived in doing this project. Students from both Class A and B found the literary interpretation of the poem most problematic. The students were given the option to write down other problems that they encountered, and many from Class B felt that they needed more time to do the project. Some of these students mentioned that they had difficulty in the literary translation of the poem, while the rest of the comments dealt with technical problems such as editing and software compatibility. One interesting comment made by Class B was that there were not enough English poems that reflect the Taiwanese culture. This could present a pedagogical implication in using English poetry in the classroom in a sense that it could be used as an opportunity to create writing tasks that are geared towards enhancing students' appreciation of the local culture.

Other than the literary interpretations that Class A also experienced, a few voiced out problems concerning team work and collaboration (see Figure 3). This is also an important aspect in doing task-based activities that require collaborative work. In many instances, Taiwanese students are not trained to work collaboratively.

5. What are the difficulties that you faced?	
#	Response
1	not sure whether the poem relates to our culture
2	Peer's laziness or low contribution fret me out.
3	Some people didn't devote themselves in it
4	technical problems

Figure 3. Class A, Q5

Question 6 was to do with students' level of satisfaction with their group performance. From Class A, 31% of the students were very satisfied with their class presentation, 50% were satisfied, 9% (3 students) showed dissatisfaction while 1 student had no opinion towards this question (see Figure 4).

6. Level of satisfaction with your group presentation:		Number of Responses	Response Ratio
Very satisfied		10	31%
Satisfied		16	50%
Not satisfied		3	9%
No opinion		2	6%
Other, Please Specify		1	3%
<b>Total</b>		32	100%

Figure 4. Class A, Q6

From Class B, 20% of the students were very satisfied with their group presentation while the majority, 70%, were satisfied with their work (Figure 5).

6. Level of satisfaction with your group presentation:		Number of Responses	Response Ratio
Very satisfied		9	20%
Satisfied		32	70%
Not satisfied		1	2%
No opinion		4	9%
Other, Please Specify		0	0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>46</b>	<b>100%</b>

Figure 5. Class B, Q6

Comparing these results with the results of Q4, it is obvious that despite the difficulty of the project, many of the students felt pleased about their performances (see Table I).

Table I. Statistical Analysis for Q4 and Q6

Question & Stat	Class A (N= 32)	Class B (N= 46)
<b>Q4</b>		
Average	3.281250	3.130435
Mode	3 (a little difficult)	3 (a little difficult)
stdevp	0.874441786	0.769209
<b>Q6</b>		
Average	4.0	4.043478
Mode	4.0 (satisfied)	4.0 (satisfied)
stdevp	0.968246	0.751809
Correlation	0.84890935	0.902197

Based on these numbers, there is a positive correlation between Q4 and Q6. This also reflects the students' attitudes toward their ability to perform in oral presentations. This characteristic is not uncommon among students from Wen Zao Ursuline College of Foreign Languages who undergo rigorous oral training during their early years of study.

Looking at the students' opinions toward the effectiveness and relevance in terms of achieving the lesson objective, 69% of the students from Class A and 72% from Class B thought that this poetry project was an effective way to link language and culture.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the potential for using poetry as a topic for a final project in a Language and Culture course. The quality of the students' presentations indicates that task-based activities can also be explored as a means of making the learning process meaningful for students. Such activity can both increase the students' level of poetic aware-

ness and provide them the opportunity to appreciate the target culture but also to better understand their local culture as well. The application of multimedia and online video tools provides students with the resources and also a vehicle for creating their own projects.

The type of literary material that will be presented in class is also an important issue. Its selection requires care and interest. Adequate length, simplicity in approach and a style that does not require an interpretation in highfalutin language should provide a good basis for material selection. However, the level of difficulty will of course depend on students' level of English proficiency. In a nutshell, in great presentations – in both the classroom and the wider world – it is not only the amount of hard work that students put in that matters but how far their imagination can go. As Gwendolyn Brooks once said, 'If you let your imagination go, you'll see we're in for some very lively poetry.'

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## Featured URLs

- My favorite Poems available at <<http://www.favoritepoem.org/thevideos/ulrich.html>>
- Students' presentations are available on the Internet at <[www.geocities.com/wentzao2004/culture/](http://www.geocities.com/wentzao2004/culture/)>