

## The Poem as a Language Workshop: Content & Skill Based Approach –A Classroom Journey

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### Introduction

Understanding the principles and **insinuations** of second-language acquisition can help teacher's meet students' needs better as English-language learners. In this one day workshop, we will briefly revisit key concepts before exploring theories addressing off-target language construction, group dynamics and anxiety through participant-driven activities and this sample classroom lessons

This One Day Language Coaching Workshop conducted on Nov 17<sup>th</sup> on a small group of 15 first year General English students was extremely effective for concentrated, quick and specialised coaching either on a one to one basis or ideally in groups. This workshop was subject specific and served to deepen knowledge of the English Language Skills and grammar and vocabulary related to specific fields and in addition served to troubleshoot issues and iron out language problems.

The theme of the workshop was: 'The Poem as a Language Workshop.'

The language exercises was exploited from the poem "TREES: and obtained the maximum effects. The workshop was tailor-made to suit the needs of the learner.

Given below is a step by step process of the teaching learning activity.

### Poem: *Trees* by Joyce Kilmer

(For Mrs. Henry Mills Alden)

I think that I shall never see

A poem lovely as a tree

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest

Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,

And lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear

A nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain;

Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,

But only God can make a tree.

- Joyce Kilmer

### Step 1: *Creating an Atmosphere*

- A casual discussion with the class on what they think and feel about trees in general, to help create the physical and psychological atmosphere which in turn will help internalize the thoughts associated with trees.

Sample Questions for discussion

a) Do you have trees around your houses? What kind ?

b) Do you know the names of these trees?

c) Are trees important? Why?

d) Are we dependent on trees? Are other creatures dependent on trees?

e) What are your feelings and thoughts when you see trees? Have you ever touched the trunk of a tree, felt its handsome ruggedness? Smelt its leaves?

f) Have you observed trees through various Seasons?

- Since 60% of learning takes place through the eyes, and more importantly, since the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner is a visual learner, the Teacher should help students visualize what they have to learn. This can be done through a firsthand/direct experience of actually observing the trees on the campus / home and also through visual aids.



- Write down on the board the words / phrases used by the students with reference to trees. It may be a collection of words like the list below. The teacher can also mind map the vocabulary associated with trees. The teacher may

also ask the students to pick out words that are in the existing poem; the teacher may ask the students to add an extra stanza to the poem by using a few of the words not used in the poem etc.

Branches	Environment	Harmful	Earth/soil
Roots	Shade	Huge	Seasons
Leaves	Cutting	Birds	Rain
Trunk	Hacking	Squirrels	Sun
Forest	Sapling	Seedling	Shrub
Timber	Wood	Hardwood	Pulp
Softwood	Stock	Topiary	Woods

**Step 2: Silent Reading:** Reading silently increases students' understanding because it helps them focus on what they are reading, rather than the pronunciation of individual words. ... When you encourage your students to read silently, you are helping them develop the strategies they need for reading fast, and with better comprehension. This activity will help learners recognize that many of the words written on the board are those in the poem, and so a rapport with the poem and the poet is immediately established.

### **Step 3: Reading Aloud**

Reading aloud is a wonderful tool to help you learn to read effortlessly and build fluency skills, stability and confidence. Teachers should encourage students of all ages to read aloud as reading aloud improves your visual memory and ability to see images in your mind.

- The Teacher next reads aloud the text, *Trees* with the correct tonal nuance this would help the learners to pick up the metrical and phonological differences and how they affect the meaning of the poem especially the last 2 lines of the poem, where the poet emphasizes the ironical suggestion that a tree is God's creation or poem and it far surpasses the poet's creation, i.e his poem, in its magnificence. The ironical tone is to be implied in the very reading of the poem.

- Next the Teachers recitation is to be emulated by the learners individually or as a choral activity, to help learners internalize the feel and rhythm of the text.

### **Step 4: Global Questions**

- There questions are framed to elicit answer which would lead to a general / overall understanding of the text.

#### **Sample Questions**

- Tick the appropriate answer
  - a. The poem is about \_\_\_\_\_
    - a) Trees b) Poems c) Poems and Trees
  - b. A prose passage may be divided in to several \_\_\_\_\_ but a poem is divided into \_\_\_\_\_
    - a) Stanzas b) Paraphrase c) Paragraphs
  - c. What are your impressions about the poet from the poem?
  - d. Can you underline words / phrases / lines which tell you about the poet's attitude to a Tree?
  - e. The poet relates a Tree to other things. Can you mention them?
  - f. Does the poem have a rhyme scheme / pattern?

#### **Step 5: Local / Specific Questions**

There questions are framed by the Teacher to elicit answer which would lead to an in-depth understanding of the given text. Questions should be graded according to the level of the learners.

#### **Sample Questions:**

- a. Make a list of the key words (note : this is necessary for a thematic understanding of the poem) You may place them in groups / sets if you think there are more than one set of key words.

(or)

The keywords in this poem fall into 3 sets. The first word in each set is given below. Can you complete the sets, with the associated words?

Set I

Tree

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Set II

Poem

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Set III i) Full of leaves

God ii) Beautiful

\_\_\_\_\_ iii) The resting place for birds

\_\_\_\_\_ iv) Chest

\_\_\_\_\_ v) Closely

\_\_\_\_\_ vi) Flattened against

b. Vocabulary exercise that help infer meanings.

### Sample Questions

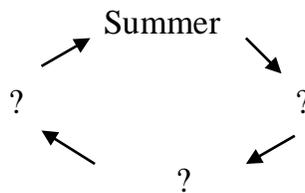
Pick out words from the text which mean the following.

### Sample Questions

a) What is the season mentioned here?

b) What are the other 3 seasons? 1) \_\_\_\_\_ 2) \_\_\_\_\_ 3) \_\_\_\_\_

c) Can you complete the seasonal cycle diagram given below?



d) What is the name of the bird mentioned in the poem?

e) Can you name 4 kinds of birds?

f) Which season is indirectly mentioned in the poem? Which word indicates this season?

g) The tree has a very close relationship with \_\_\_\_\_

h) Who are the makers of poems?

i) Who is the maker of a tree?

j) Why do you think the poet refers to poets as fools?

- Questions related to understanding the implications, nuances, denotational and connotational meanings.

### Sample Questions

Which statement do you think is true?

a. In stanza I the poet says that

i) A poem is as lovely as a tree

ii) A tree is a lovely poem.

b) Personification is a literary device in which something non-human is given human qualities or a attributes.

In Stanza II the Tree is personified as a baby and the Earth which feeds the tree with its life-giving water in personified as the Mother. Can you identify other instances of personification and also explain them.

(Ans. Stanza III The tree is personified as a devotee / worshipper

Stanza IV The tree is personified as a maiden with adornments in her hair.

Stanza V The tree is personified as a maiden who lives in a close relationship with the rain, which is also personified as the maiden's lover).

c. Which part of the tree is its "hungry mouth." (Ans: Roots).

d. The life sustaining water in the earth is described as "\_\_\_\_\_". (Ans: The earth's sweet flowing breast)

e. The "leafy arms" is a description of the tree's \_\_\_\_\_ (Ans: branches).

Questions related to lexis, syntax, metrical qualities, tone etc.

### **Sample Questions**

a. "Prest" is the old English spelling for "pressed" what is the modern English spelling for blest?

b) Identify the adjective in Line 2 (Ans: lovely)

c) Pick out the adjective in Line 3 (Ans: hungry)

e) Identify the noun which is used as an adjective in Line 6. (Ans: leafy)

f) 'A nest of Robbins' is an example of a collective noun. What terms would you use for a group of singers, wolves, magistrates and whales?

(Ans: Chair, Pack, Bench and School)

g) Pick out the auxiliary verb in LI (Ans: Shall)

h) What is the present and past tense of 'has lain' (Ans: Lie and lay)

i) Do you find any rhyme scheme or pattern in this poem? (aa, bb, cc, dd, ee, aa)

j) The poem has a \_\_\_\_\_ tone.

i) happy ii) sad iii) critical iv) appreciative and ironical

Identifying Foregrounding techniques

Sample questions related to foregrounding

a. Is there any phrase which is frequently repeated? Why do you think the poet does this?

(Ans : “A Tree” is repeated for emphasis and bringing out the uniqueness of this creation)

b. The uniqueness of a Tree is brought out by the poet in Stanza I and Stanza 6. Quote the lines which illustrate this uniqueness

(Ans : “A poem lovely as a tree” and “But only God can make a tree”)

Or

Point out a conceptual deviance in the poem.

(Ans: A poem lovely as a tree)

c. What poetic device is used in Stanza 6?

(Ans: Parallelism and contrast)

d. What purpose does the above serve?

(Ans: Gives the poem an ironic twist which suggest that a tree / creation is God’s poem one that far surpasses his own verse.)

- The Poet’s intention

Sample Questions

a. Does the poem delight you? How?

(Ans: The poet expounds at length the magnificence of even a single tree, not just in appearance but also in how it lives and interacts with the vaster aspects of nature – using personifications).

b. Does the poet give us a message?

(Ans: Yes, especially in Stanza 6 where the poet gives credit to the master creator before whose creation, the poet’s own creation (poems) appear trivial).

**Note**

The method of analysis suggested above can be re-constituted using the five steps in different orders of priority, depending on the level of the learners.

**PART – II**

**SAMPLES OF WRITING ACTIVITY**

**a) Composing a poem from a list of given words.**

Words given :

Tree, branches twing, bud, rope, axe, dormant blows, hack, serene, fragrance, power, crash, sprout, foolish man, strewn, blows, blossom.

Upon a tuft of grass so green,  
With blue skies above serene;  
I lay beneath the willow tree  
When life has no duties; careless and free.

With winter gone, spring gives way  
To show off buds in full array.  
Insects are strewn all around  
On earth's fresh sweet-smelling ground.

The branches twing in the breeze  
I love to hear the rustle of leaves.  
The fragrance of flowers fill the air  
My life is replete without any care.

My bliss is disturbed by the sight  
It spoils my happiness and gave me a fright.  
A man comes near with axe and rope  
All I can do is hold on to hope.

I find myself grabbed by the hand  
And shoved around, I don't understand.  
He began to hack my beloved tree  
On and on he went in wunts of three.

He seemed to be a giant with power  
Crushing my spirits with every cruel blow  
He looked so fierce grinding his teeth  
I kicked at the dust that lay at my feet.

**b) Developing the lines given into a poem.**

How to save my tree, I did not know  
Helpless I watched him ramming his blow  
Alas! His task accomplished my tree fell down  
With a dashion wild, it slammed to the  
ground.

My beloved tree lay dormant and dead  
My head felt as heavy as lead  
And then I saw sprouts below  
That would soon grow into my willow.

The foolish man did not know  
That my dear willow soon would grow  
It had escaped the illusive snare  
And would blossom everywhere

With tears in my eyes and a smile on my  
face  
I looked through the blissy haze  
Hopes and dreams bloomed in my heart  
And I will look forward to a new start

Ruth Chen  
I.B.A. Lit.

My Dear Tree

In my garden  
there was a mango tree  
I feared climbing  
as a bee might sting me

It shot up  
with its branches free  
And anchored down  
with roots invisible to see

Under the shade  
came a sleepy cow  
As a bird sang  
melodiously on its bow

I asked its fruits  
"when will you fall?"  
My mother gave me one  
with a sweet call.

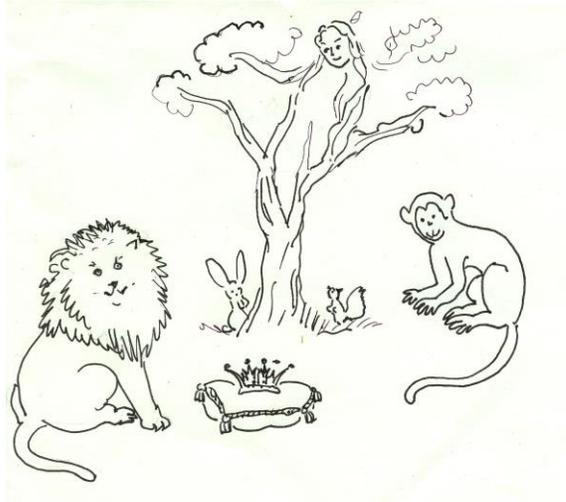
A storm came  
and had hit the tree  
It turned up  
with its roots free

I cried and sighed  
as it sailed on the sea  
Now from a tree  
a beautiful ship was he.

Brinda.S

I B.A. Literature

**c. Composing a poem on a given picture**



The forest was in chaos,  
The lion was dying,  
Decide soon he must,  
Of who was to be the King.  
It was then he saw the monkey,  
Jumping and trying to fly,  
He felt he was funny,  
And decided to give him one big try.  
He would give the monkey his crown,  
His kingdom, his forest —  
If he was successful,  
In three different tests.  
The monkey was dreaming  
Of fixing a plume to the crown.  
He would walk with pride,  
And at the animals, he would look down.

She duped him into thinking

The branch was the rope

Lo and behold, she cut it,

And he just couldn't cope.

He went rolling to the lion's feet,

The animals were laughing,

The monkey was a clever one

He started praising the king.

The lion was impressed.

He felt the monkey was cool.

Even though he had failed,

He knew he was no fool.

The forest was in chaos,

The monkey was king.

What would happen to the animals,

One can only think.

Rakee L.  
I.B.A.Lit.

**d. Comprehension across Cultures**

**Sample Question**

1) Study the lines given below. What are your observations regarding the two prose poems from two different cultural backgrounds?

- a) Trees are poems that the earth writes about the sky. We fell them down into paper that we may record our emptiness.

Kahlil Gibran - *Sand and Foam*

- b) My feelings were very much the same as a tree might have, which was not allowed to live to its full life, but was cut down to be made into packing.

R.Tagore - *Creative unity*

**e. Enlivening the Senses**

**Sample Question**

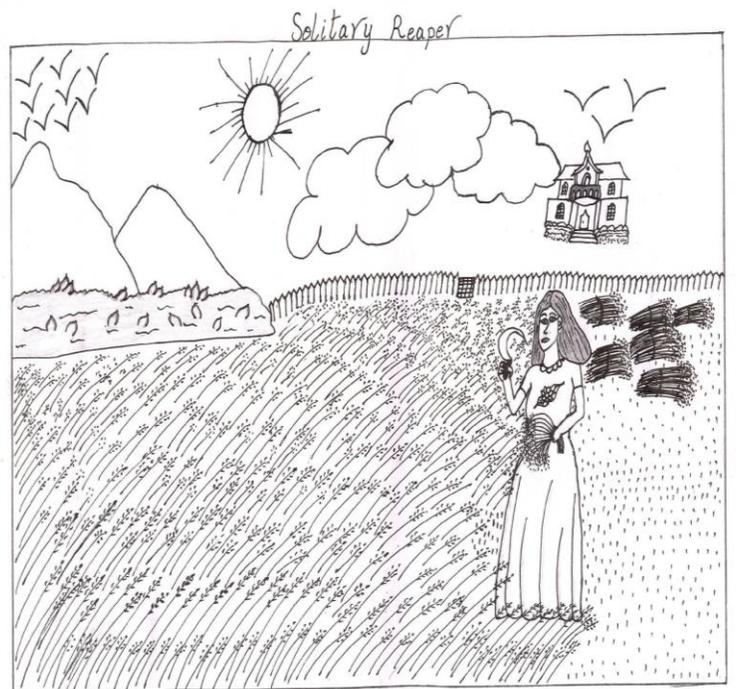
1) Study the advertisement given below. Is there any proximity between the language of this advertisement and poetic language in the poem *Trees*.

A tree that lives for 50 years generates Rs.5.3 lakhs worth of oxygen, recycles 6.4 lakhs worth of soil fertility, facilitates 6.4 lakhs worth of soil erosion control, creates 10.5 lakhs worth of air pollution control and provides 5.3 worth of shelter for birds and animals. Besides it provides flowers and fruits. So when one tree falls or is felled, the city's net loss is worth more than 33 lakhs.

Think before you cut a tree!

**f. Posturizing Poems**

**Samples**



- M. Anugraha.  
B.A. English Literature



### **g. Creative Dialogue**

Poetry Alive. Students enact 'The Solitary Reaper' for a poetry enactment competition at Nirmala College, Coimbatore, India (Nov 2007)



What were the Learning Outcomes?

At the end of this workshop, participants were able

- to read ,appreciate and interpret; to enact the text , create a poem and demonstrate good comprehension of text .
- to demonstrate the ability to evaluate, integrate, and apply appropriate information from various sources to create cohesive, persuasive arguments, and to propose design concepts.
- .to identify environmental problems, develop a respect for nature