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# 10 Learning through literature and the arts

Poetry, drama, film and painting all feature in this chapter, which shows how the arts can be used to deliver successful lessons. **Kirill Igantov** opens the chapter, with a discussion of how to use poetry in the EFL class. Two papers on drama follow: **Geeta Goyal** describes how drama activities were useful to postgraduate students in India, while **Stella Smyth** explores the use of drama to enhance seminar skills in EAP classes. Film is the topic of **Kieran Donaghy**'s paper, which discusses the use of narrative film and video in the language class; **Anna Whitcher** also explores the use of video, but from an ELT materials development perspective. Finally, **Maria Barberi** outlines a variety of arts-related activities designed to engage and inspire learners.

## 10.1 Contemporary poems in ELT: after-text exercises and activities

**Kirill Ignatov** *Moscow State Lomonosov University, Moscow, Russia*

The first stage of working with modern poetry in ELT classes is the selection of poems for the course, made on the basis of emotional maturity and the needs of the audience, as well as the aims and specificity of the course. In the second stage a poem from the selection is introduced to the students, which should be done in such a way that students become interested in its text and all the difficulties, linguistic or cultural, are resolved. Then comes the third stage, namely, after-text activities and exercises.

Native speakers studying poems in the course of language or literature studies are prompted to carry out stylistic analysis. Yet, questions routinely posed to schoolchildren at GCSE tests such as 'What imagery does the poet use?' or 'How does the poem use language?' (Newman 2011) can puzzle if not frighten off foreign students. We suggest a way that reaches the same objectives gradually, tackling consecutively the content of the poem, its language and structure and finally its message.

### Concentrating on the content of the poem

To make sure the students understand what the poem is about, two techniques are suggested: (a) mind-mapping and (b) timeline drawing. The former is suitable for lyric or elegiac poems, as it is a visual representation of hierarchical information that includes central concepts described in the text surrounded by connected branches of associated topics, ideas and things mentioned in passing. The latter, which is a graphical representation of a period of time, on which important events presented in the text are marked, is better suited for narrative or dramatic poems.

Drawing mind maps is better done as a brainstorm when all the students work as a class, throwing in ideas, with the teacher listing them on the board. Then together they



try to establish the links between the listed items, grouping them in clusters. Developing timelines is better done in small groups; findings are then discussed in class.

### Concentrating on the language and structure of the poem

The focus here is on the key words of the poem, crucial for its understanding. This can be organised as small group discussions or individual exercises in class or at home, as they involve work with monolingual or translation dictionaries. The exercise is devised in the form of questions. For example, the following may be asked about the title of the poem *Brand New Ancients* (Tempest 2013): ‘What is *brand new* and with which words is this phrase typically used?’; ‘What does *ancient* mean as a noun?’; and ‘Don’t the meanings of the words *new* and *ancient* contradict?’

If students are not particularly averted to terms from formal poetics ('verse', 'stanza', 'rhyme', 'meter'), they can be encouraged to use them in the discussion of the poem structure. This can add a flavour of 'professionalism' to their opinions thus further stimulating their interest.

### Concentrating on the message of the poem

Interpreting a poem can be a daunting task for foreign-language students who often feel that their lack of linguistic proficiency might hinder the 'correct' understanding of the poem. That is why it's important to show them that it is their feelings and impressions that matter, and not some canonical interpretation. Thus, the question of the message of the poem can be substituted for the following, 'What emotions or feelings does this poem evoke in you?' This task is better done individually as homework in a written form.

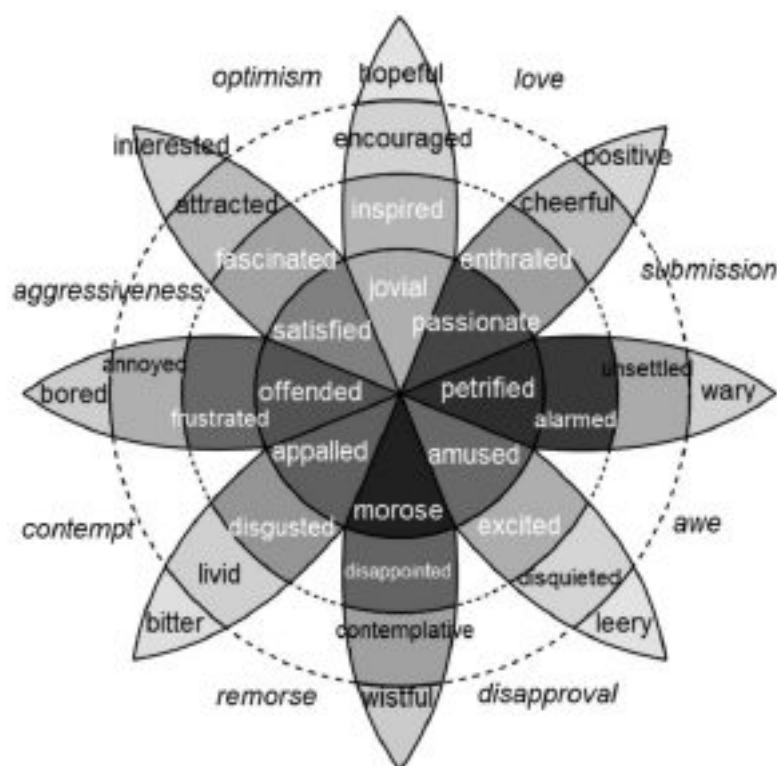


Figure 10.1.1: *Impression Meter: basic emotions and words expressing them*

To facilitate the answer to the question, students are given a copy of the Impression Meter (Figure 10.1.1). The picture is a modification of the famous Wheel of Emotions (Plutchik 2003), where all the descriptive nouns have been substituted for adjectives and present participles. They can be used as complementation to active ('feel ...') and passive ('makes me ...') verbs, easily modified by adding adverbs. The passive participles can be turned into active ones and used to characterise the poem itself.

This is a recurring exercise for each of the poems, so at the beginning the task is explained to students and they are presented with the 'Impression Meter'. After three or four classes they become quite proficient in creating short essays where they describe and explain their feelings. As they progress, the 'meter' can be modified by substituting the adjectives with their synonyms or more complex structures that describe feelings. Soon, students are able to come up with amazingly thoughtful and original analysis, which demonstrates the great creative potential of poetry.

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## 10.2 Improving speaking skills in English through drama activities

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**IATEFL Ray Tongue Scholarship winner**

### Introduction

English is taught as a second language in Haryana state, India. The majority of students in this region consider it the most difficult subject; even at postgraduate level, they find it difficult to express ideas in English which they otherwise follow and understand. However, given the worldwide acceptance and importance of the language, it is necessary for them to learn communication skills. Therefore, it is a challenge for an English language teacher to help students acquire these skills. In a second language classroom where the focus is on verbal communication, participation and interaction, the use of drama activities can contribute a great deal. Studies suggest that drama activities can promote interesting ways of motivating language learners and teachers (Maley and Duff 2001; Phillips 2003). It may prove helpful in reaching out to those students who are too afraid or nervous to attempt expressing themselves in English. In drama activities, 'neither teacher nor student feels "at risk", but they willingly change roles and status to achieve the aims of the lesson' (Wessels 1987: 15).

### Objective

The presentation discussed experiments carried out by the author for improving speaking skills in English and facilitating the learning of the second language through drama activities.



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