

Chapter 17

Giving Beginning Adult Language Learners a Voice: A Case for Poetry in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Introduction

Poetry is by no means new to the beginning foreign language classroom. In fact, for as long as literary study has been one of the primary goals of the language learning experience, poetry, because of a variety of factors such as its brevity, universality, and rhythm, has been seen as a particularly well-suited device for introducing beginning adult language learners to literary conventions. With the shift toward more contextualized language teaching practices in recent years, poetry has also been seen as an effective way to exemplify a particular lexical or grammatical topic. While both of these approaches—that is, viewing poetry either as an example of the foreign language’s literary tradition or as an exemplification of a particular lexical or grammatical topic—succeed at exposing students to poetry, they also, by holding poetry aloft as a model of exemplary language use, can inadvertently serve to highlight beginning students’ language deficiencies. In other words, presenting language in its most sophisticated form only for the purposes of interpretation or exemplification has the potential of treating native-like proficiency as the measure of students’ final achievement in the foreign language, a measure that is largely unrealistic and unattainable for the vast majority of adult foreign language users, particularly for the

college-level learner who is limited by the mere four years available for foreign language study. Recent scholarship, most notably by Kramersch, Cook, and Blyth has emphasized how a teaching philosophy that privileges the native speaker and the attainment of native-like proficiency fails to recognize and take advantage of the many linguistic and nonlinguistic skills that adult foreign language learners bring to the classroom.¹ In the context of this debate, this essay makes a case for a different approach to poetry in the beginning foreign language curriculum, an approach that is centered around having students read and, more importantly, write poetry in order to help them develop a voice in their foreign language at precisely the time when they are arguably the least confident about their language abilities.

Central Tenets

Serving as the basis for this approach to poetry in the beginning classroom are five basic tenets. First, the central role that language plays in the formation of one's identity needs to be respected. In the attempts to develop students' language skills and literacy, at times practitioners lose sight of how closely one's ability to express oneself and communicate is tied to one's own identity. Research on sociocultural approaches to literacy (e.g., Kern; Lantolf) has highlighted the role that writing and reading play in both constructing and revealing one's identity and suggested that language instructors place more emphasis on recognizing the identity construction that takes place in student writing.² Beginning language learners, because of their limited communicative abilities, could possibly pose a legitimate problem to such a pedagogy, but only if they are measured against native speakers and not allowed to draw on their multilingualism to express themselves. In encouraging creative self-expression, this approach recognizes the need for expression among beginning adult learners, if for no other reason than to allow them to explore their own fledgling identity in the foreign language.

Second, the primacy of the native speaker needs to be deemphasized. In addition to being an unattainable goal for the majority of foreign language learners, native-like proficiency is also difficult to define and quantify. Differences among native speakers such as education, age, and regional dialects present legitimate obstacles to attempts to define or describe a native speaker of a language. As stated above, if foreign language curricula can refrain from establishing native-like proficiency as their ultimate goal, then there is great potential to create an educational setting that views foreign language learners as successful multilingual speakers rather than failed native speakers. Kramersch and Nolden perhaps summarize this point most

succinctly when they say, "Learners have to be addressed not as deficient monoglossic writers, but as potentially heteroglossic narrators."³

Third, following logically from the previous point is the need to recognize and take into account what Cook calls students' multicompetence, that is, their native language competence and their developing foreign language ability.⁴ Once students' multicompetence is recognized, their linguistic needs as foreign language users as well as their cognitive and intellectual needs as native speakers of their first language can be addressed. Too often our beginning students are shortchanged because there is the subconscious tendency in the field to equate limited linguistic ability with limited cognitive ability and thereby remove any intellectual rigor from beginning language instruction. Challenging beginning foreign language students intellectually needs to become a priority if all of their competencies are to be served.

Fourth, students need to see the foreign language as an object of play rather than as some monolithic entity that they are fated to never master. Once students recognize the playfulness that can be a part of learning a language, their ability to express themselves can be greatly enhanced. Krusche and Krechel write of the benefits of playing with language and suggest that beginning foreign language students are particularly open to this idea because of the novelty the language has for them.⁵ The newness of the foreign language, its sounds, expressions, and orthography, are often so intriguing to beginning students that they feel compelled to experiment and even subvert the language. However, in order to allow beginning students to experiment with the language and to express themselves in ways that reflect their individuality as language users, language practitioners would have to grant their students a degree of freedom and autonomy that typically has not been the focus of beginning language instruction in the United States. Instead of harnessing the creative, playful desire to play with the language, beginning language instruction has traditionally emphasized grammatical accuracy and mastery in its ultimate pursuit of native-like proficiency. The behavioristic thinking that still influences much foreign language instruction further discourages playful language use out of fear that beginning learners will develop faulty, nonnative-like habits that will become fossilized and thereby difficult to overcome. Ironically, playful language use does not typically increase as learners' language competence increases because at more advanced levels of language acquisition, the novelty of the language has usually worn off and, with it, the desire to experiment in a playful manner. In the end, then, the current language teaching paradigm fails to serve the beginning student by not capitalizing on the inherent playfulness that arises when language learners first come into contact with the foreignness of a new language.

Fifth, there needs to be a greater attempt to create a sense of dialogue between instructor and teacher. Van Lier makes the distinction between symmetrical and asymmetrical relations in the classroom.⁶ Instead of the more traditional teacher-centered classroom in which the instructor initiates, monitors, and ends teacher–student interaction, he argues for a more symmetrical relationship between students and teachers that is marked by a more equal exchange of information. This approach argues for a similar approach in which beginning students' competencies are recognized and cultivated to the point where they feel they are on a more equal footing with their instructors and where a greater sense of symmetry is achieved between students and teachers.

Ultimately, these five tenets have in mind a learning environment in which instructors encourage and authorize students to express themselves creatively and playfully without feeling that their language use is in some way inadequate or deficient. A specific classroom-based methodology for achieving such an environment follows.

Methodology

This approach to poetry was implemented in eight first-year German language classes at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville in the fall of 2000, but it can be adapted to any standard first-year language class that covers a range of themes and topics (e.g., clothing, weather, free-time activities, daily routine). In other words, the type of textbook or the grammatical topics covered should not affect the approach's implementation or effectiveness.

The first step in the approach is to select appropriate poems for beginning students. Instead of relying on more traditional criteria such as a poem's linguistic difficulty, this approach considers poems suitable for beginning instruction if they relate to a particular theme of the course and if they highlight how language can be played with. For that reason, concrete poetry, with its playful, experimental language and thematization of typical daily occurrences, is particularly well-suited for use in beginning language classes. One of concrete poetry's hallmarks and why it fits so well into beginning language instruction is its ability to manipulate basic elements of language usage (e.g., orthography, word boundary, verb conjugation, word declension) to highlight how the traditional boundaries of language use can be expanded. Precisely at the time when learners are themselves grappling with issues of verb conjugation or word declension, they can see how one poetic movement plays with these idiosyncrasies of the language for great

effect. In German language examples of concrete poetry (*konkrete Poesie*), for example, Rudolf Steinmetz's *Konjugation* adds humor and meaning to the otherwise dry and boring exercise of German verb conjugation by using the conjugation pattern as a point of departure for a brief dialogue. Burkhard Garbe's *LEHR REICH* also draws on the reader's familiarity with verb conjugation to condemn National Socialist Germany. Wolf Biermann's *Kleinstadtsonntag*, meanwhile, demonstrates how simple, straightforward questions and answers can be used to highlight the tedious monotony of small-town bourgeois life. Equally effective are the examples of concrete poetry that play with word boundaries and sounds. Jürgen Völkert-Marten's *z.B. Wörter* as well as Ernst Jandl's *mein reich* and *viel* all illustrate how blurring word boundaries can have unexpected and often comical results.⁷ Beginning learners are particularly attentive to such effects, for they are still coming to terms with the constituents of their new language. In fact, seeing others playing with the words and sounds of the language to produce odd configurations serves to validate the learners' own experience of confronting a new and foreign language.

To introduce each poem, the following procedure, adapted from Maley and Duff's book on poetry in the language classroom, was used:

- (a) Preparing the poem
- (b) Working into the poem
- (c) Reading the poem aloud
- (d) Analyzing the cultural implications of the poem
- (e) Composing poetry based on chapter themes
- (f) Introducing and analyzing students' poems
- (g) Publishing student poems⁸

In the first stage of the procedure, students were prepared for the poem by activating their prior experience with topics or themes presented in the poem. For the poem *viel* by Jandl the word *Deutsch* (German) was written on the board and students were asked to write down words, expressions, names that immediately came to mind. These items could be in the students' first or foreign language and could encompass just about anything, ranging from mistakes they made to words they found amusing. Students then compared their lists in groups and posted their results on the board for the entire class to see. As the last step in this first stage, students were asked to look for commonalities among the items on the board and comment on why these words might stand out to an American learning German. They pointed out that many of the items had either unusual pronunciation or spelling (Words such as *Quatsch* [nonsense]). They also noted that some students found mistakes or gaffs they had made to be particularly

memorable (*ich bin ein Buch* [I am a book]). This introductory stage set the class up nicely for the next stage—working into the poem.

The focus here was on developing students' sense of playfulness regarding language by having them consider the significance of word choice and word order. In the case of *viel*, students were shown the entire first half of the poem and then instructed to work in groups to complete the poem. In another first-semester class, students were shown the entire first half of the poem and then the second half with all the words except "sophie" missing. They were instructed to work in groups to fill in the missing lines. Each group then wrote their version of the poem on the board. Juxtaposing the students' version with the original instead of treating one as being correct or incorrect allowed for an interesting class discussion that focused on the advantages and disadvantages of specific word choices.

Once students heard the poem and had a general idea of it, the next step was to practice reading it aloud. In the case of the poem *viel*, students read it aloud several different ways over the course of three class days. First, students decided through discussion which lines or words of the poem should be read fast, which ones slow, which ones loud, and which ones soft. These lines were marked on a transparency to remind students when the pace and loudness changed, and then they read the poem chorally following their own recommendations. After one reading, a discussion ensued about changes that were needed in the reading. On the next class day, students were grouped and assigned one of the six words in the poem. They then read the poem aloud as a class with each group speaking only their assigned word. In the following class, in conjunction with a lesson that introduced various adjectives, the class was divided up into groups and told to work on an oral rendition of the poem that conveyed a particular mood. Recently learned adjectives such as "cynical," "nervous," "excited," and "mean" were put on the board to help guide students. Groups then performed their reading for the rest of the class.

As students were exposed to more examples of concrete poetry during the initial weeks of the semester, they were given increasingly more historical and sociocultural background on this literary movement in the postwar German-speaking world and asked to consider why certain German-speaking authors chose this form of expression at this time in their history. Central to the students' analysis was an examination of the values, ideas, and behaviors that were featured and prioritized in the poem. Once they reached some conclusions about what was prioritized, they then began to extrapolate this analysis onto a larger plane and assess the broader culture out of which the poetry arose. For instance, after having read Rudolf Otto Wiemer's *unbestimmte zahlwörter* and *empfindungswörter* and learned that these works were written during the postwar era in Germany, students began to see how simple and repetitive verse can suddenly become a significant carrier of cultural

meaning when situated in a specific historical context.⁹ No longer viewing the poems as mere word and sound play, the students recognized that these poems revealed a great deal about how one poet saw Germany's trying to come to terms with its National Socialist past. In addition, the students considered whether the poems' formal aspects contributed to the poems' effectiveness and why such a form might have resonated with poets in the postwar German-speaking world. Through such analysis, students gained important insight into the legacy of National Socialism in postwar Germany and how, in the case of concrete poetry in the German-speaking context, it left a school of poets speechless to the point of having to resort to new forms of expression.

Having read and analyzed the poems, the students' next step was to react to the poetry by composing their own poem based on some of the issues raised in class. For example, after having read *viel* and other examples of concrete poetry, students were instructed to write a personal reaction to their first weeks of learning German. Interestingly, students expressed reservations about composing their own poems and typically cited previous failed attempts at writing poetry in their first language as the primary reason for their uncertainty. To counteract these legitimate concerns, instructors told the students to refer to the list they had brainstormed to start this unit. Students also were given and reminded of a variety of basic techniques for writing poems. For instance, they were shown examples of haikus, limericks, and acrostic poems, just to name a few. Class time with the support of the instructor and peers was then needed to get students used to these techniques as well as the act of writing poetry in German.

In the next stage, the instructor asked the students to assume the role of the teacher and introduce their own poem to the class just as the first set of poems had been introduced; that is, they needed to devise an activity that guided their classmates into the poem. They then needed to lead the class in an oral reading of the poem and finally have them analyze the poem for its cultural content. This act of presenting one's own poem to the class and then having the poem analyzed draws on the methodology outlined by Kramsch and Kramsch and Nolden that recognizes student writing as a legitimate and highly revealing source of cultural meaning.¹⁰ The experience of having their writing undergo careful interpretive scrutiny also serves to increase students' awareness of how their own language use resonates with others and what it reveals about their personal cultural identity.

As the final stage, in an effort to further legitimize and showcase this poetry writing project, students compiled and published their poems in a class-wide anthology at the end of the semester. This summative document was distributed to all German language students and plans were underway to make the anthology available on the departmental website.

Conclusion

The implementation of this approach to poetry revealed that poetry is a genre that provides students the formal and stylistic freedom to tackle intellectually stimulating themes typically reserved for more advanced students. Expressing one's feelings toward learning German or describing a memorable relationship are two such themes that would have been much more difficult for beginning students to carry out, for example, in prose or narrative form. As a genre, then, poetry appears to address the perennial problem of finding intellectually challenging activities for adult students with limited foreign language competence. At the same time, practitioners need to remember that most students have had prior experiences with poetry that have not been altogether positive. As a result, students might not necessarily respond immediately in an enthusiastic manner to poetry reading or writing assignments. If, however, they are able to see poetry as a means to experiment with their new and developing language in a way that is both amusing and liberating, they then are much more likely to see poetry as an ally in their language acquisition process. The success of such an approach would naturally be greatly enhanced if students could be given the opportunity to continue exploring the possibilities of creative self-expression in a coherent, systematic fashion in subsequent semesters as they move through the foreign language curriculum. In the end, the experience of implementing poetry in the beginning foreign language classroom has indicated that poetry can offer the language learner a great deal: (1) a means for self-expression; (2) an opportunity to play with language; (3) a chance to engage more cognitively challenging ideas; and (4) a forum for developing an identity in the language. Poetry thus has the potential to play a role in transforming beginning language instruction into the intellectually challenging and creatively expressive endeavor it can and should be.

Notes

1. Claire Kramsch, "The Privilege of the Nonnative Speaker," *PMLA* 112 (1997), 359–369; Vivian Cook, "Going Beyond the Native Speaker in Language Teaching," *TESOL Quarterly* 33 (1999), 185–209; and Carl Blyth, "Redefining the Boundaries of Language Use: The Foreign Language Classroom as a Multilingual Speech Community," in *Redefining the Boundaries of Language Study*, ed. C. Kramsch, AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1995), 145–183.

2. Richard G. Kern, *Literacy and Language Teaching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and James Lantolf, *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000)
3. Claire Kramsch and Thomas Nolden, "Redefining Literacy in a Foreign Language," *Die Unterrichtspraxis* 27 (1994), 34.
4. Cook, "Going Beyond."
5. Dietrich Krusche and Rüdiger Krechel, *Anspiel. Konkrete Poesie im Unterricht Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1992).
6. Leo van Lier, "Constraints and Resources in Classroom Talk: Issues of Equality and Symmetry," in *Learning Foreign and Second Languages: Perspectives in Research and Scholarship*, ed. H. Byrnes (New York: Modern Language Association, 1998), 157–182.
7. Rudolf Steinmetz, *bundesdeutsch. lyrik zur sache grammatik* (Wuppertal: Hammer Verlag, 1974); Burkhard Garbe, *Statusquo—Ansichten zur Lage* (Göttingen: Edition Herodot, 1974); Wolf Biermann, *Nachlaß 1* (Cologne: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1977); Jürgen Völkert-Marten, *bundesdeutsch. lyrik zur sache grammatik* (Wuppertal: Hammer Verlag, 1974); and Ernst Jandl, *serienfuß* (Darmstadt/Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1974).
8. Alan Maley and Alan Duff, *The Inward Ear: Poetry in the Language Classroom* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
9. Rudolf Otto Wiemer, *beispiele zur deutschen Grammatik* (Berlin: Wolfgang Fietkau Verlag, 1971).
10. Claire Kramsch, "Social Discursive Constructions of Self in L2 Learning," in *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning*, ed. J. Lantolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133–153 and Kramsch and Nolden, "Redefining Literacy."