

# Writing poems and song lyrics in the classroom

**Brian Cullen**

*Nagoya Institute of Technology*

## Reference data:

Cullen, B. (2006). Writing poems and song lyrics in the classroom.

In K. Bradford-Watts, C. Ikeguchi, & M. Swanson (Eds.) *JALT2005 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper describes a preliminary study into writing poems and song lyrics in the EFL classroom. The study had the dual aims of a) offering students the opportunity to engage in creative writing and b) facilitating language acquisition. The paper describes the procedures and gives some examples and discussion of student writing. Although some interesting poems and songs were produced, the paper suggests that more structured procedures are necessary to achieve benefits in language acquisition and improved writing and offers some possible improvements.

## Possible benefits of writing poems and song lyrics

**R**esearchers such as Fortune (2003) and Keplinger (2001) have argued that creative writing is a powerful means of language acquisition, especially when it is carried out in small groups. Many teachers recognize this and ask students to write narratives or, less frequently, poetry. Poetry writing in EFL has been advocated by researchers and teachers (Koch; 1990; Maley, 1989; Moulton, 1997) for teaching language skills such as vocabulary and syntax, while also improving English pronunciation and rhythm.

Songwriting is a less established area than poetry writing, but many of the benefits of poetry writing are also clearly inherent in songwriting. In addition, the benefits of using music in the classroom have been well documented (e.g., Murphey, 1992; Cullen, 1999). Apart from the positive motivational effect of music, there is much evidence to suggest that music can enhance language acquisition by strengthening links between the areas of affect and cognition in the brain and utilizing the links between right brain stimulation and language skill (Winston, 2004; Jourdain, 1998).

### The study

Over the course of a semester, students carried out seven poetry and song lyric writing assignments. There was little attempt made to explicitly teach how to write a poem or song. For example, no guidance was given on rhyme. Instead, extensive input was provided through popular songs that students learned every week. These were introduced through cloze exercises, comprehension questions, and discussion questions. An example is shown in Appendix 1. The writing assignments developed out of these. The writing

assignments are shown in the table below with a student example for each. For lyric writing assignments, students wrote alternative or additional lyrics to the melodies of well-known songs.

When students completed each writing assignment, they posted it to an Internet blog site. This was a simple site on [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com). We did not use the blog within class, but it allowed students the opportunity to read and comment on other students' writing. This could easily be developed into a full-scale online writing workshop. It also allowed the teacher to easily keep track of student assignments.

**Worry poem**

1. Listen again to the song “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”.
2. List three things that you worry about.
3. Give reasons why you don’t need to worry about them.
4. Write a poem where each verse is of the form:

I worry ...

But I am happy because ...

*Example 1*

I worry ...

that it will rain after class because I have no umbrella now

But I am happy

because when I wait in here, I talk my friends a lot

I worry ...

that I will get fat because if I go fat, I feel very shame

But I am happy

because everybody think I take after my grandmother

I worry ...

that I will get sick

But I am happy

because I can rest and sleep

I worry ...

that I will lose my grandmother because she is very old

But I am happy

because I never forget her

I worry

that I will fail my test

But I am happy

because I can make more efforts now

I worry

that I will forget my homeworks because I have to remember many things

But I am happy

because I have a free time

<p><b>'She' poem</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen again to the song "She", as sung by Elvis Costello.</li> <li>2. Think about a person that you know well.</li> <li>3. Write four adjectives to describe that person.</li> <li>4. Look at the song again. It uses metaphors to describe the woman.</li> <li>5. Make some metaphors to describe the person that you know.</li> <li>6. Combine these metaphors into a poem</li> </ol>	<p><i>Example 2</i></p> <p>Michael Jordan may be God        He may be air, Fly, fly, fly ....        His face looks like a baby when he shoot.        He always succeeded to shoot in an important scene        He may be god. Everyone knows and respects him</p> <p><i>Example 3</i></p> <p>He may be the sun that shines in the sky        May be the blanket that wraps my body        May be the puzzle that has no answer        He perplexes me but he is my treasure</p>	<p><i>Example 4</i></p> <p>My little sister is very cheerful        She cheers me like sun        But she makes me sad like rain sometimes        And she is very cute        She fawns on me like cat        But sometimes she sulks like dog        The sister is near my heart</p>
<p><b>Haiku</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen again to the song "My Winter Coat" by Paul Kelly.</li> <li>2. In the song, Paul Kelly sings about an object (his coat) that holds memories for him. Think of an object that you own that holds memories for you. I tell the students about my mandolin.</li> <li>3. Listen to two short poems about other objects.</li> <li>4. Count the number of syllables in each line.</li> <li>5. Write a haiku poem about an object that is important to you.</li> <li>6. Ask your partner to read it and check the number of syllables in each line.</li> </ol>	<p><i>Teacher Example</i></p> <p>My sweet mandolin        Found in a London window        Rich sound in my life</p> <p><i>Example 5</i></p> <p>My old baseball glove        Found in a local shop        Memory with father</p> <p><i>Example 6</i></p> <p>My left-handed clock        Tock tick tock tick tock tick tock        Time goes to the past</p>	

<p><b><i>Oh Susannah</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen again to the song <i>Oh Susannah</i>.</li> <li>2. Think about something that you'd rather be doing.</li> <li>3. Count the number of syllables in each line of the first verse of <i>Oh Susannah</i>.</li> <li>4. Write your own verse to the tune of <i>Oh Susannah</i> about what you wrote in number 2.</li> <li>5. Check that you can sing your song to the tune.</li> <li>6. * Download the karaoke version of <i>Oh Susannah</i> and record it on a computer using the program <i>Audacity</i>.</li> </ol>	<p><b><i>Example 7</i></b></p> <p>I want to return my home          Now it's my best desire          I want to see my family          Give me the good old days</p> <p>The distance is too long to go          The weather disturb me          So I waver in my judgement          And my telephone rang</p> <p>Oh, I'm homesick          Oh, dear my home town          I want to see my friends          Now it's my best desire</p>	<p><b><i>Example 8</i></b></p> <p>I'm mixing melting butter          until it comes to be soft          I'm putting shortening in it          mixing and mixing</p> <p>I'm putting suger in it          putting eggs in it too          I'm putting flour in it          mixing and mixing</p> <p>I'm putting it          on a oven plate          I'm burning and cooling it          It comes to be cookie</p>
<p><b><i>'Free' song to any familiar tune.</i></b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Write alternative words to any well-known song.</li> <li>2. * Record it on a computer using the program <i>Audacity</i>.</li> </ol>	<p><b><i>Example 9</i></b></p> <p>The Exam is Tomorrow          (To the tune of Don't Worry, Be Happy)</p> <p>I don't study chemistry hard          But today I became supermode          The exam          Is tomorrow</p>	<p>I have to study difficult questions For me those          are terrible missions          The exam          Is tomorrow</p> <p>The exam is a dynamite          I cant go to bed tonight          The exam          Is tomorrow</p>

<p><b>Grandfather's Clock Rewrite</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen again to the song, Grandfather's Clock.</li> <li>2. Think of an object, a person or a place that made a strong impression on you.</li> <li>3. Use your ideas in number 2 to rewrite the lyrics of Grandfather's Clock.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Example 10</b></p> <p>The birds have been chattering Croak, cluck, croak, cluck The woods have been bustling Murmur murmur, murmur murmur But they cut, burn, never to form again And the fairy passed</p>	<p><b>Example 11</b></p> <p>My cat was cut his tail on that night So I cried and climbed on the hill My cat was loved by everyone in my town So I couldn't believe such a thing</p> <p>My cat was brought when I was nine years old The cat's eye was blue and brite But my cat go where I don't know When I enjoy my school days</p>
<p><b>Kansas City Rewrite</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen again to the song, Kansas City.</li> <li>2. Think of a place that you would like to visit. What will you do there?</li> <li>3. Use your ideas in number 2 to rewrite the lyrics of Kansas City.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Example 12</b></p> <p>I'm going to Nagashima Nagashima here I come (x2) They got a bathing beauty there And I'm going to get me one</p> <p>I'll be sitting on a beach Or down by the poolside (x2) With my Nagashima baby And some cracked ice</p> <p>If I stay here with this woman I think I'm going to die I can't stand Nagoya And that's the reason why ...</p>	

## Discussion

Although this paper does not attempt to analyse the student writing in detail, some brief points are discussed below.

### *Creative writing*

Students produced interesting songs. The examples given above are among the most interesting of all the students' work, but most students produced at least one interesting song or poem. On the negative side, some students did not see the point of writing poems or songs. Others felt shy about expressing their own feelings.

### *Motivation*

Most students enjoyed the writing activities very much. A lot of natural communication was also generated through posting the poems and songs on the class Internet bulletin board. In addition, apart from the short-term motivational effect, as students began writing their own songs, they became much more aware of the lyrics of English songs and became more interested in listening to English songs more carefully and more frequently. This can lead into greater long-term motivation and exposure to English input.

### *Language acquisition*

Language acquisition is generally postulated to take place through input (ex. Krashen 1983) and output (ex. Swain 1995). Determining the impact of the output required by the activities is beyond the scope of this paper, but a few examples will illustrate how students picked things

up from input and used it in their own creative writing, thus facilitating language acquisition. The use of English rhythm is shown very well in examples 8, 10, 11 and 12. However, other important elements of poems and lyrics were not picked up. For example, rhyme is not generally used in Japanese songs or poems. Despite the English song input provided, most students did not become aware of its importance in English. An exception is example 9. When I explicitly pointed out the importance of rhyme to a few students, one produced the following example:

#### *Example 13*

I don't like studying math  
But I want to kiss

Here, we can see the attempted rhyme between 'math' and 'kiss'. This makes little sense until we remember that these are both Japanese loan words. In Japanese, 'math' is pronounced as 'maasu' and 'kiss' is pronounced as 'kissu'. It is clear that we need to give our students rhyming practice which moves them away from katakana English. This would also be useful for raising awareness of Japanese problems in English pronunciation.

Here is another example:

#### *Example 14*

I wanna be here with her,  
But she went out and I'm alone  
So I'm lonely, I remember a lot of things  
I can't live without her  
I love her nice eyes  
I remember her face I can't forget  
When I remember her, I cry and cry  
So I talk with my client  
But I can't forget her

‘Rhymes’: [a lot : alone] [went out: without]  
[nice eyes: face I] [cry and: client]

The student wrote the ‘rhymes’ on the side of the page to draw attention to them. This was a good idea because they are certainly not ‘rhymes’ in the conventional sense. When they are pointed out, it is not without poetic interest, but it shows that students need more explicit guidance on the nature of rhymes in English.

### Improvements

The study had the dual aims of language acquisition and creative writing. A few basic suggestions for improving both aspects of the procedure are shown in the table.

Language acquisition	Better poems and lyrics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide more language feedback for students, in groups and from teacher.</li> <li>• Build up specific vocabulary areas by asking students to write about people, places, or things. You can provide useful word lists.</li> <li>• Practice a grammar point by asking students to use it in a poem (ex. Worry Poem).</li> <li>• Practice language stress and pronunciation through syllable counting (ex. Haiku)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teach rhyme specifically</li> <li>• Improve lexical scope through use of idioms, clichés, thesaurus.</li> <li>• Strengthen the images in student writing through multi-dimensional visualization.</li> <li>• Set up student discussion groups (online or in the classroom) to facilitate discussion of the writing. An audience is always effective in raising people’s standards.</li> </ul>

### Rethinking the process

For a group of English literature majors, achieving a high standard of creative writing may be important. However, in many other situations, the teacher may decide that the benefits of creative writing are available without insisting on particular linguistic features. Songwriting and perhaps any kind of creative writing add variety to a language course, but it is unlikely that they will ever form a core course element for most teachers. In addition, students’ attitudes towards creative writing are ambivalent. If the benefits of songwriting or other forms of creative writing are to be achieved, it is probably most useful to integrate the activity into a complete learning unit in which the creative writing only forms one part. Writing a song is not a goal for most L2 students, so songwriting must be considered as just one element of a teaching plan.

This is similar to an idea advocated by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) in their text-driven approach. They recommend choosing a text for its interest value and then using the linguistic features of the text to promote language acquisition. A song is a naturally interesting text for most learners and as such provides an excellent starting point for a learning unit. Roughly following their framework, I have recast one of the activities. In this case, the text consists of the song *She*.



<p>She            May be the face I can't forget            The trace of pleasure or regret            May be my treasure or the price I            have to pay            She may be the song that summer            sings            May be the chill that autumn            brings            May be a hundred different things            Within the measure of a day</p> <p>She            May be the beauty or the beast            May be the famine or the feast            May turn each day into a heaven            or a hell</p> <p>She            May be the mirror of my dreams            The smile reflected in a stream            She may not be what she seem            Inside her shell</p>	<p>She            Who always seems so happy in            a crowd            Whose eyes can be so private and            so proud            No one's allowed to see them            when they cry</p> <p>She            May be the love that cannot hope            to last            May come to me from shadows            of the past            That I'll remember till the day            I die</p> <p>She            May the reason I survive            The why and wherefore I'm alive            The one I'll care for through the            rough and ready years</p> <p>Me            I'll take her laughter and her tears            And make them all my souvenirs            For where she goes I've got to be            The meaning of my life is            She</p>
--	---

### Procedure

1. Ask students about someone they know well. Think of a few words to describe that person. Play the song 'She' as sung by Elvis Costello quietly in the background as students work.

2. Play the song again and fill in the blanks.
3. Examine the metaphors in the song. Imagine what the woman looks like. Imagine meeting her and talking to her.
4. Look back on the words in number 1 and develop them into metaphors similar to the song.
5. Use your metaphors to write a poem about the person you know well.
6.
  - a. Listen and read the lyrics of the song again.
  - b. Count the number of times that he uses the phrase "she may be" or "may be ...".
  - c. In line two, the phrase "she may be" could be added without changing the meaning. Count the number of times that the phrase could be added to the beginning of the line without changing its meaning.
  - d. Why do you think the writer has used so much repetition?
  - e. Why do you think he doesn't repeat the phrase at the end of the last verse? What does he do instead?

Option: Transform your poem into a song

1. Count the syllables in each line of verse 1.
2. Add words to your metaphors to try to make them the same as verse 1.

3. Write your own song.
  - a. Listen to the song again and see if your words match.
  - b. Listen to the karaoke version and sing your own words in your mind.
  - c. Make any changes that you would like to make.
  - d. Perform your song for your partner.
  - e. Record your song with the computer program *Audacity*. You can just ‘talk’ your song if you don’t like to sing!
  - f. Share your recording with other students and get feedback.

### Conclusion

The creative writing assignments produced some interesting results, but the faults in the students’ writing are as revealing as their achievements. These require further analysis. Several improvements have been suggested above including explicit work on genre features such as rhyme, and more integration of the creative writing assignment into text-driven learning materials.

### References

- Cullen, B. (1999). Unpublished Masters Thesis: *Songs in the Discussion Classroom*. Birmingham: Aston University.
- Fortune, T. (2003). Maximizing Language Growth Through Collaborative-Creative Writing. *ACIE Newsletter: The Bridge* 6(2).

- Jourdain, R. (1998). *Music, The Brain, And Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination*. Harper.
- Keplinger, D. (2001). The Words Themselves: Benefits Of Creative Writing Workshop For Students Of English As A Second Language. *Radical Pedagogy* 3(3).
- Krashen, S.D. & Terrell, T.D. (1983). *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*. Hayward, CA: The Alemany Press.
- Koch, K. (1990). *Rose, Where Did You Get That Rose: Teaching Great Poetry to Children*. New York, Vintage.
- Maley, A. and A. Duff (1989). *The inward ear: poetry in the language classroom*. Cambridge [England]; New York, Cambridge University Press.
- Moulton, M. R. H., Vicki L. (1997). Pattern Poems: Creative Writing for Language Acquisition. *The Journal of the Imagination in Language Learning and Teaching IV*.
- Murphey, T. (1992). *Music and Song*, Oxford University Press.
- Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (eds.), *Principle and practice in applied linguistics; Studies in honour of H.G. Widdowson* (pp. 125-144). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. and Masuhara, H. (2004). Approaches to materials writing. In B. Tomlinson and H. Masuhara. *Developing Language Course Materials*. Singapore: RELC, 19-26.

**Appendix 1***Father & Son*

Cat Stevens

It's not time to make a change

Just \_\_\_1\_\_\_, take it easy

You're still young, that's your \_\_\_2\_\_\_

There's so much you have to know

Find a \_\_\_3\_\_\_, settle down

If you want you can marry

Look at me, I am old but I'm \_\_\_4\_\_\_

[Remainder of lyrics omitted]

**Comprehension**

Underline any words that you do not understand.

Try to guess the meaning with your partner before checking them in your dictionary.

Who is singing each verse?

[Other questions omitted]

**Discussion**

What differences are there between you and your father/mother? The questions below will give you some ideas to start. Write some more questions and then discuss it with your partner.

- Did your father live in the own or city?
- What hobbies does he have?

[Other questions omitted]