

Creative poetry writing

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In recent years the case for the use of literature in language teaching has been advanced by a growing number of contributors to the professional journals. While most of this work has appeared in the 1990s and 2000s, the subject did attract attention in the previous thirty years, as shown in a recent bibliography. Stephanie Vandrick, who contributed a chapter entitled 'Literature in the teaching of second language composition' to the collection of essays edited by Barbara Kroll, *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing* (2003), lists work from as early as 1967. Vandrick's chapter provides a most useful introduction to the field: she covers arguments for and against the use of literature in L2 writing classes, reviews the history of the controversy over the use of literature in teaching L1 and L2 writing, and discusses the ways in which literature may be used.

Jane Spiro's *Creative Poetry Writing* grows out of the context of this work. It belongs to the Oxford series of Resource Books for Teachers, under the editorship of Alan Maley, who has been active in promoting the use of literature in language learning. The titles in the series cover aspects of language, creative expression and wider subjects such as the Internet and the workings of the classroom. A related series of Primary Resource Books covers similar themes for young learners. *Creative Poetry Writing* has been widely work shopped, in both L1 and L2 classrooms and in different cultures. It should be noted that these trials have been conducted with reference to recent work. Spiro, for example, acknowledges *Poetry as a Foreign Language* (1999), edited by Martin Bates, 'the first and only EFL poetry anthology', which arose from 'the first EFL poetry competition' (p.v).

Maley defends Spiro's approach by referring to the creative uses of language as distinct from the pragmatic and functional. He argues that her book makes 'an important

contribution to redressing the balance between “referential” and “representational” uses of language’ (p.3), saying that playful language is capable of giving the learner much pleasure. As her method involves the writing of poetry, he addresses the misgivings of critics who maintain that such creativity is intimidating and time-wasting. The structure of the book, which allows students to progress from activities based on relatively simple techniques to work on genres and more complex uses of pleasurable language, should remove such reservations.

Spiro’s own defence of her work in the introduction is that the emphasis on the functional occurs at the expense of the imaginative and that it denies much of what occurs naturally in the learning of language in childhood. She has constructed the book for teachers ‘who wish to add a sense of production, excitement, and performance to the language classroom’ and who desire ‘to give students the opportunity to say something surprising and original’ (p.5). It is clear from the trials of the material and a detailed examination of it that it could be used for both L1 and L2 learners and for students across a wide range of ages. Writing from years of experience in teaching English in various cultures, she offers a lucid explanation of her goals, whose expression is aimed at producing a class anthology, and her reasons for choosing poetry in the first place. Its use of repetition, pattern and length is particularly suited to the needs of the language learner, and its openness to human themes, such as alienation or excitement, which may not normally arise in a language lesson, make it attractive to a teacher who supports her sense of purpose.

The organisation of the book takes the learner from the study of sounds to more sophisticated uses of poetic language in the making of narrative. The poems she has chosen include ones by such important poets as T.S. Eliot, Stevie Smith and John Updike to others whose works should pose no dilemmas for those who are studying poetry at an early stage. It is time, however, that we saw a greater reach into international poetry in English in books of this kind, which would give us, for example, more than one Australian poet (Keith Harrison). Like many other books in language teaching it may be used in different ways, as Spiro herself suggests. Each section within the ten major groupings (from sound poems to sentence pattern poems to genre poems and so on) is presented according to a template that indicates student level, the time for the activity, and aims, with information on method and procedure. Some brief information on the forms of poetry and a glossary of some key terms in teaching language and poetry is provided. There is a small list of further reading. The section on collections of short poems for the classroom should include the best Australian work in the area, such as Paul Richardson, Ken Watson and Margaret Gill’s *Snapshots of Planet Earth: An Anthology of International Poetry* (1998).

Creative Poetry Writing has been designed with impressive attention to the ways in which the details of verse forms may be used in language teaching. Its use should encourage both teachers and their students to enter into a wider dimension of language. Unlike some earlier work in the field, the texts chosen do not present cultural or linguistic impediments to learners. While its methodology may lead to a view of poetry as technical and mechanical, that sense of writing should disappear in the pleasure of creativity. The structural and the communicative should combine to produce the imaginative. Spiro has made a significant contribution to an emerging area of language teaching.