

Poetry for EAL and SEN students

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Overview

Tom Charles explored poetry with groups of students whose first language, in most cases, was not English. He believed that 'visual exploration' of the poetry would help develop understanding and an awareness of multiple interpretations. Like Caroline Mortlock, he used the free Windows Movie Maker software to collate and display the pictures. He found that his students gave much more spontaneous responses than in the normal classroom situation and gained confidence in expressing their own opinions.

Introduction

The students in this case study are either those who have had very little exposure to the English language or those who regard both English, and school, as a 'boring waste of time'. [Appendix 1](#) gives some details about their background.

During the 2007/8 school year, I taught English Foundation to Yr 11 – Set 4; Yr 9 – CHUMS (combined humanities) and Years 7/8 – combined group. The Yr 11 group comprised 18 students: 11 SEN and seven EAL. Target grades are 3Cs, 13Ds and 1E (1 not entered for any examination – newly arrived from Nepal). EAL students' home languages: one Urdu, one Iranian, two Polish, two Nepalese and one Punjabi. CHUMS - Yr 9 (Combined Humanities – English, History, Geography and RS) are all of low ability and include four SEN and eight EAL students (three Polish, two Urdu, one Punjabi, one each Nepalese and Portuguese). Lower School Years 7 and 8 – a combined group of 25 students, most of whom are either SEN or EAL or both.

Aim

My aim in planning the use of ICT with these groups was to make the activities interesting, challenging and enjoyable ('fun'). The outcome would be that each student increased in confidence and ability in the use of English and, by using pairs or groups in the activities, would develop both self- and peer-evaluation.

The hard-to-teach topic: poetry

The hard-to-teach topic I was addressing was poetry. This encompassed the visualisation and subsequent individual interpretation of each particular poem. I wanted the students to 'see' how the poets' choice of words and use of language created atmosphere, mood and meaning. This 'visual exploration' of the poem should lead each student to realise that there is 'no one correct answer' to the meaning of the poem. If the students could substantiate what the poetry meant to them through visual, sometimes also audio, means



then each would have succeeded in creating his or her own impression of what the poet was trying to communicate.

Method

The method I wanted to employ was quite straightforward. At the outset, I wanted to engage the students with ICT in a constructive, challenging and novel way.

- I wanted them to make a presentation of **a poem they had not read before**.
- Firstly, they had to **read and annotate** the poem.
- Secondly, they had to fill in the **planning sheet** with their own ideas.
- Next, they had free choice to choose **images and sounds** for their presentation from the Internet.
- Finally, they combined the images and sounds with what they believed to be the **key phrases and words** from the poem.

I believed that poetry could be brought to life and made relevant by the simple use of Movie Maker. Students could be given an unseen poem and then asked to present it in visual form, including what they thought were the main quotations.

Students would first be given an outline worksheet that they could use to jot down their ideas whilst examining the poem. They could then go online to research suitable images that would convey their ideas about the poem. The finished presentations could include added music files and/or voice-overs. These presentations could then be evaluated by their peers.

This use of ICT would also allow students to prepare and research at home and in their own time at school. I thought that the enjoyment and ‘fun’ factor in allowing students the freedom to express their ideas to everybody would go a long way in dispelling the myth that some topics were hard to teach. Obviously preparation would be vital but, once the techniques had been developed, the use of ICT might be extremely beneficial to each student’s learning and development.¹

What happened?

Eight Lower School and four Year 11 students came into school on Monday and Tuesday during a mid-term break. They were in an IT room from 9am until 12 midday. It was very casual. I gave each student a copy of a poem: Year 11s had a poem from another culture – ‘An Abandoned Bundle’ by Oswald Mtshali, and LS had ‘On the Highway’ by Nguyen Quang Thieu (pre-release 2007/8). None of the students had seen the poems before.

I explained that they had to read the poem, making short notes about what they thought it was about on the poem itself. They discussed this with their peers. I thought I might have to explain various images/words etc. but was surprised that, by working together, they came up with very astute responses to the poems. (We so often underestimate their abilities!)



¹ Rationale: NATE/Becta conference

Next, I gave them each a [planning sheet](#). On this they noted down key images/symbols, sounds or music that might be used and a selection of key phrases/words from the poem itself.

The Internet search began. Much discussion followed about the chosen pictures. It was interesting to hear why they were deciding on some images and not others. It was extremely surprising to look at their choices and I was amazed at the different methods they used to search for images. Some went for the 'images' search engine on Google and others preferred to surf for specific sites. 'An Abandoned Bundle' produced some startling images of rabid dogs and rubbish tips. Two students found moving images of smoke and fish struggling in nets!



My biggest worry was that of time limitation. In a one-hour lesson, students had found all their images, but had not yet begun to put it all together in Movie Maker. They were so involved and occupied that I thought that the impetus would be lost when they returned to complete the task. However, the following day they were still very keen about the project. (I would recommend that a two-hour session be organised if possible. Finding available PCs might be a problem in some instances but an enthusiastic request amongst colleagues should do the trick.)



The greatest enjoyment for both the students and me came when they proudly showed off their presentations. They were intrigued at their different visions of the poetry, yet all had discovered the underlying theme or purpose of the verse.

Key findings

I found that by using ICT in this way, all the students became much more imaginative in their interpretations of the poems. Each student gave a much more spontaneous response than could be expected from within the normal classroom situation, and he or she could substantiate these responses without hesitation. All the students realized that they had achieved the aim of the exercise and had no worries about giving their responses. They gained confidence in expressing their own opinions and were quite happy to put forward their points of view.

The most important findings were:

1. that students used the poetry to expand and explore their own views of the world;
2. that students have an ever-changing global awareness of life in other cultures;
3. that students had the ability to work together in an English language situation;
4. that students' abilities tend to be underestimated by most teachers;
5. that students' use and knowledge of the English language increased;
6. that students' confidence in their own use of language increased dramatically;
7. that poetry in the curriculum could be explored in an engaging and entertaining manner.

Next steps

Once the students have used this method to 'visualize' in this way, a simpler approach may be used. They could be given a poem and a planning sheet and, without access to the Internet, they would then

discuss the poem and write down the images they thought might 'fit in' with the ideas contained in the poem. A quick 'Tell us all what pictures you might use' and 'Why did you choose that particular image?' around the class would show whether they were on the right track. I hope that they would develop enough confidence in visualising in this way to substantiate their choices. 'Right – go home and, for homework, choose one of the images you have imagined and see if you can find a corresponding one on the Internet...'

An alternative method, which I have used before, develops confidence and critical awareness. The students use a program that offers them a wide choice of vocabulary to construct a short piece of blank verse on any topic. I found that poetrylibrary.org was suitable for the ability range of my students. This application allows students to send their 'poetry' to a partner via e-mail. The partner then produces a presentation showing their interpretation of the piece.

Obviously, the aim of these approaches is to enable the students to visualise mentally the 'pictures' that the words represent and to gain a more accurate idea of the intention of the author. I hope that eventually all students will use this technique confidently. The method reinforces their ability to substantiate their ideas. This technique has proved very successful in CHUMS, with students preparing their own presentations that are then shared with and evaluated by their peers. This advances **cross-curricular literacy** and the confidence the students gain is invaluable.

Students' impressions:

This is fun...

They blocked this site! ...and I want that picture...

Can we do this on weekends?

Please organise a club, sir!

When can we do that again?

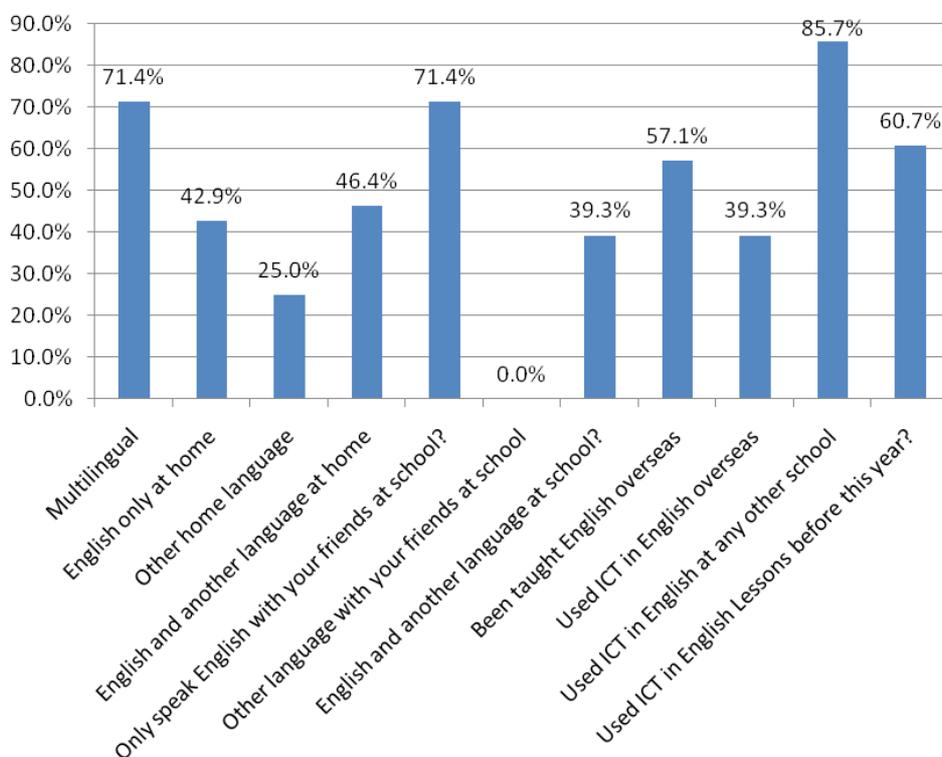
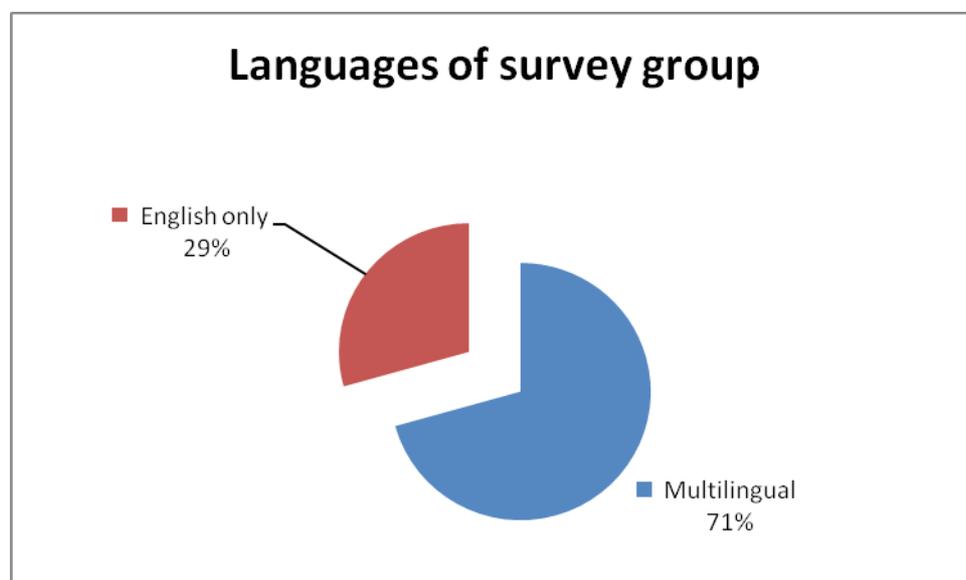
I just thought of something else I could have used...

When can we get mini-laptops?

Afterword: it looks like the school is thinking about equipping certain groups with mini-laptops for the new academic year.

Appendix 1

I carried out a survey of study groups on home language and use of ICT during May/June 2008. Copies of the survey questionnaire are available on request. The graphical representations below show results:



Appendix 2

English task planning sheet for use with Movie Maker:

Key images/symbols sounds/ambience	Comments and ideas for representing these in the film	Key words and phrases that will appear in the film

Additional resources

These items were also created during the course of the project:

- 'Using ICT in English': questionnaire used to produce results in Appendix 1.
- *On the Highway*: video presentation created by Year 8 students in response to a poem.
- Staff presentation: PowerPoint presentation to colleagues at The Bishop David Brown School on the benefits of ICT use by students, produced in response to the initial NATE/Becta Conference, March 2008 as part of the school's policy of extending the use of ICT across the curriculum.