Engaging Children in World Poetry

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Education Pack for Primary Schools (KS1/2)

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NOTE TO TEACHERS

Poems can help us think about life around us in a way we haven’t done before. Translated poems especially can enable us to understand different points of view from people around the world.

Children can use translated poems to become explorers of the world – without needing to travel far away – and observe the world around them as if it’s all new.

Try out some of the ideas in this pack and encourage children to use all their senses to notice little details – reassuring them that all their ideas and points of view will be interesting and unique.

All these poems come from a focus on children’s poetry in this summer’s issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, a magazine founded fifty years ago to bring the best of world poetry in the best translations to British readers. You will receive a copy of the magazine with this pack: in it you’ll find more information on all these poems in introductions written by the translators especially for children. You can also enjoy other children’s poems from other parts of the world and an interview with Michael Rosen and Russian children’s poet Marina Boroditskaya on poetry and education. This pack is intended to allow teachers more access to poetry from around the globe and the activities are designed to stimulate creative engagement in the poems through discussion, reading, making, playing and exploring. It has been designed for primary education teachers.

BECOME AN EXPLORER

You could build on this 'become an explorer' approach by encouraging the children to always have the following on them as they explore the world (both in and out of the classroom):

- note pad
- pen
- envelope/small tin to collect little things

Within the classroom you can use a variety of media to capture their ideas:

- Worksheets
- Home-made and decorated boxes to fill up with words, objects, ideas
- Drawing material
- Models
- Handling objects
- Audio, music, sound effects
- Cartoon drawings to discuss different ideas
POEM 1 Title: ‘The Moon Hare’
Written by: Marina Boroditskaya (in Russian)
Translated by: Sasha Dugdale

THE MOON HARE

Tick-tock
Only light from the hall
The moon hare
Runs over the wall
On a flower he stops
A wallpaper flower
With a little thin flute
And a curious call
Softly he rocks
Only here on the wall
And never outside
Only here in my room
In the quiet and gloom
And pipes and peeps
When I
Can't
Sleep.

BACKGROUND
In Russian a 'sun hare' is a speck of light reflected on the wall. When the sun shines in the window you can make a sun hare run over the wall by reflecting the light with your watch or a mirror. So what or who is the 'Moon Hare'?

Read the poem out loud together to start with.

CLASS DISCUSSION
Have you noticed lights shining and reflecting like sun hares and moon hares? Reflections and projections are everywhere – think of some. List different things that are shiny and reflect light in different ways.

ACTIVITIES
Collect some different objects
Choose them based on how they reflect light and list the different qualities – e.g. reflective, translucent, opaque.

Make a moon hare
What do you think a moon hare looks like? Make one using different materials, you can draw, use bendy Wiki sticks, modelling clay. Use some sticky pads to stick on sparkly sequins or plastic gems.
Listen to some sounds
What sounds do you notice when you can’t get to sleep – what can you hear from your bed?

Make a sound map
Stay in one place for an hour and document all the sounds you can hear and the times you heard them. Mark the approximate location of the sounds in relation to you on a map.

Explore patterns
What patterns do you notice from your bed – is there a wallpaper pattern? Explore and document as many patterns as you can within a room or when you are on your travels – in nature, human-made or both. Capture some using pencil rubbings.

Capture cloud shapes
Can you look out the window and see the clouds in the sky? Are they different at night? Study and try to copy the shapes you can see made by the clouds.

Marina Boroditskaya is supported by the Russian Institute of Translation
POEM 2
Title: 'I WISH I always had an alibi...' 
Written by: Toon Tellegen (in Dutch)
Portraits by: Ingrid Godon
Translated by: David Colmer

I WISH

I WISH I always had an alibi,
If they arrested me, I'd smile and say,
I am sorry to disappoint you,
but it couldn't possibly have been me.
This is my alibi.
I'd pull it out and smack it down
on the table in front of them.
If they thought it wasn't enough, I'd have another.
I'd be the boy with a thousand alibis.
They'd sigh and open the door of the station
and let me go again.
Completely exonerated, and over
and over again!

BACKGROUND
Ingrid Godon created some portraits then gave them to poet Toon Tellegen to write a book of poems in response – so the portraits were created first. Rather than trying to respond to each of her characters individually, the poet was inspired by them all to invent his own characters, portraying them through short poems that describe a particular train of thought, usually beginning with 'I WISH...'. Seven of these poems are published in this summer's issue of Modern Poetry in Translation (p. 81 – 85).

Read out the poem together. Discuss the portraits together and describe them for pupils who can't see them or who need extra description:

'The portraits are strange yet incredibly expressive. The characters stare out at you, or just past you, with tiny wide-set eyes that draw you in like two wells. Between them, the nose spreads to join a massive forehead that seems swollen with thoughts and dreams and fears. Nobody really looks like that, yet when we look at them, we can't help but see the emotions of people we have known or met or encountered.'

(Taken from David Colmer's introduction to the poems)
CLASS DISCUSSION
Think about the relationship between the picture and the poem – in this case, the poem was written in response to the images.
If you see the picture first does it change the way you read the poem?
Or does the poem change the way you see the pictures?

The poem explores the inner voice and thoughts and dreams and fears that swirl around the heads of the children in the portraits, thinking about trains of thought that begin ‘I wish...’ By wishing, the children in the poem have a chance to round up moments, memories, feelings and things that they don’t like to send them to the police station.

What would you put into jail?
What do you think has happened in the poem to lead to ‘them’ arresting the boy in the poem?
What is an alibi? What would you do if you had some good alibis?

The boy thinks about travelling back in time to change something that happened.
Have you thought about time travelling? What place or time would you go back to?
Is there a particular moment when you would change your path or decision?

ACTIVITIES
Create some portraits
Think yourself into other people’s worlds. Go people watching (OR look at portraits in magazines, newspapers, postcards).
Sit in a public place and document people you see for one hour. Make sketches about one thing that stands out about them.
Think yourself into the world of this portrait. Think about:

- where they are
- sounds
- tastes
- smells
- textures
- how they feel
- colours

Think about what they might be wishing for.

NOTE TO TEACHERS
If any of the children need help to see people or to read expressions you could describe them for them. From the descriptions find out which features interest them most and capture them in the portraits, or you could listen to conversations and different voices and try to ‘read’ what the different people are like from their voices.

Make a map of your favourite place

- Think about your favourite place - it might be a house and street, a museum or a park.
- Visit it (in your mind).
– Map it out on a piece of paper then describe everything in detail.

**Capture smells**

– Think about the smells in your favourite place.
– Go for a walk (or in your mind).
– Make a list of all the smells – can you identify where they’re coming from? Mark them on the map.
THE LANGUAGE OF GHOSTS

Mama, today I discovered the language of ghosts.

What are you talking about Claudio?

Yes, mama. Seriously, I discovered the language of ghosts.

To say hello they say: Hoo hoo.
To say yes they say: Hoo.

And how do they say goodbye?

I don't know, they haven't left yet.

CLASS DISCUSSION

The poem is written as a dialogue between mother and son.
Read it out loud together taking different parts.

Do you believe in ghosts?
Do you think Claudio's mother does?
Or is she just playing along with him in a game of make believe?

The ghosts have their own language. If you met one, what do you think a ghost would say to you? What would you say to a ghost?

ACTIVITIES

The poem is a conversation between mother and son.
Create some actions to go with the words and act out the conversation.

Collect some conversations
Spend some time listening to overheard conversations and create a list of interesting words and phrases. Write them on paper and put them into your own jar of useful words.

Do you have a favourite ghost story?
Interview some friends and family about their favourite ghost stories. You could capture the stories as audio recordings and write out what they say.

Make some ghosts (for younger children)
Imagine what their different ghosts would look like and draw, model, decorate them.

Create your own secret code/language
http://www.activityvillage.co.uk/codes
BEFORE THE BIRTH OF TOYS

Near the cattle pen
In front of my parents' house,
I found an empty olive oil can.
Who would throw it there?
No one I knew ate so well.

I took a knife from the kitchen
And cut four holes in the tin.
I made the wheels from clay,
Beat fleshy jute leaves into string
And carefully tied it to the thing.

What a great truck to pull around!
I built it a road out of sand
Painted black with powdered dung.
My sister came and I warned her,

'Don't you touch my truck or dare
Cross my highway,' but she said,
'C'mon. Let me take your car
For a spin, and I'll teach you how to play
Handa with pebbles' – a sissy game for boys,

Before the birth of toys.

CLASS DISCUSSION
Read the poem out loud together.
Whose voice can we hear in the poem?
Do you think it is a memory from the writer's actual childhood?
Or another Eritrean boy's?

ACTIVITIES
Handling objects
Gather together some materials mentioned in the poem, e.g. clay, tin can, leaves, string, sand, earth (you might want to replace dung!), pebbles.
Put the objects into a bag and let the children explore them using only touch and by describing them.

Use the materials to make tactile boards by gluing them to a sheet of paper or cardboard. Ask people to guess what the materials are by touching them.
Talk about your favourite toy
What is or was your favourite toy? What was it called? What was special about it? What did it smell, taste and feel like? What did it look like? How did it make you feel?
Draw your favourite toy.

Make a toy
Use modelling clay and other materials to make a toy to play with.

Create your own game
Gather together lots of pebbles and make up a game called ‘Handa’ – how would it work?
TIPS FROM POETS ON TEACHING CHILDREN POETRY

We asked top UK and Russian children’s poets how they felt poetry should be presented in school and here are some answers.

**Michael Rosen**, former children’s laureate and author of *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*:

I’ve found the following useful:

a) I ask the pupils if there is anything in the poem (or the whole poem itself) that reminds you of anything that has happened in your life, or in the lives of people you know. I ask them to talk about these and why or how these reminded you.

b) I ask the pupils if there is anything in the poem (or the whole poem itself) that reminds you of anything you've ever read elsewhere, anything from a film or TV programme or any other work of art. Why and how does it remind you? Talk about this.

c) I ask the pupils to come up with questions. These can be about anything that is a puzzle about the poem, or it can a question you would like to ask the poet (if the poet were there) or anything you would like to ask anybody in the poem, or indeed any thing in the poem.

d) We collect these questions up and see if anybody (or groups or the whole class) can come up with answers to these questions. We can if we’re OK about it, do them as monologues from within the character of the person, creature or thing in the poem.

e) I suggest that poems 'stick together' by a variety of means. The best known are rhyme and rhythm. But, I say, these are only one (or two!) particular kinds of ‘repetition’. Repeating things is one of the prime movers of poems. Can we do some ‘spotting’ and see if we can find any kinds of repetition? Then (if it’s a copy of the poem) we can draw on the poem, loops round the bits/words/ideas that are repeated and draw a line between them. I call these the ‘secret strings’ that hold a poem together. You, I say, are the ‘poem detectives’ and your job is to find strings. There are no right and wrong answers. If you can find a string, it’s a string. After we've done that, I say, 'opposites' can be a kind of 'string' too. Poets are fond of binaries: opposing one idea or thing or image or being against another. So next step might be to find those kinds of string too.

f) After all this, we look at what we've got. In my experience, we have a mix of ideas, interpretations, suggestions, analyses, observations about poetry and how poetry works that have come from the pupils and at no stage have I said, this is THE meaning, or the only meaning, or the true and only method of the poem. In my experience, the pupils are nearly always very enthusiastic, very animated, and full of talk and discussion about the poem itself, and how they relate to it. As it happens, they are then much more receptive to ideas of a more formal nature, should I or anyone else want to introduce those... For example about allusions that the pupils themselves did not come up with.
Marina Boroditskaya, one of Russia’s best-loved and top-selling children’s poets, and a translator of poetry from the UK, including *The Gruffalo*:

I usually ask specific questions after reciting certain poems, sometimes I repeat a particularly funny passage that the kids laughed most at and ask, ‘Which word do you think holds the funny effect together, like a little screw or nail?’ And they suggest various ‘funny’ words and we gradually come to a conclusion that it can be a very ordinary one, like ‘almost’. Or I can ask, after reciting a poem about a paper umbrella from my childhood, how come that flimsy toy turned out to be ‘the longest-lasting in the world’ and after some discussion someone comes up with: ‘memory is like a tin – it keeps things forever’. In a teenage audience I sometimes just ask, ‘So what do you think it’s all about?’ and get answers like ’Love’, ’Sadness’, ’Missing a friend’ – and of course there are no wrong answers. The youngest children like drawing pictures to illustrate a poem, and I sometimes ask them to do it. And of course I encourage the audience to ask me questions; my favourite one, usually coming from a thoughtful-looking teenager, is, ‘How did it feel, writing your very first poems?’ ‘It felt like extra homework’, I say, ‘Just for you and no one else, and you don’t have to do it but you’ll get no peace till you do’. Sometimes – though seldom – I get back an understanding look...

INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS
This education pack was brought to you by *Modern Poetry in Translation*, a tri-annual magazine which publishes world poetry in the best translations. We have teamed up with the Children’s Bookshow to distribute copies of our recent children’s poetry focus, called ‘I WISH…’ together with this pack to teachers attending the Bookshow across the UK. The pack was designed by access consultant Shelley Boden.

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We welcome feedback on this pack and magazine. Please email [editor@mptmagazine.com](mailto:editor@mptmagazine.com) if you have any thoughts or suggestions on how we can do it better!

If you use the pack and have a spare moment to email us a photo of children engaged in the activities or an account of how it went we will send you a free issue of *MPT*.

Thank you!