
Reading Differences

Teaching sequence for *Sheep Don't Go to School*

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About the book

This is a unique collection of children's poetry that celebrates the languages and cultures of 13 Eastern European countries. The poems evoke a sense of climate, both geographical and political. They include traditional nonsense rhymes, riddles and epic poems as well as more contemporary works. Several of the poems have been translated especially for this publication and do not appear in other anthologies. Countries represented are Albania, Bielarussia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Russia, and the former Yugoslavia.

Structure of the teaching sequence

There are three main parts to this teaching sequence, each one divided into several sessions:

- i reading and responding to a selection of shorter poems from several countries
- ii three poems by one Czech author as a starting point for children's own compositions
- iii close reading of one Russian poem.

Depending on the interest of the class, the sessions may be adapted and other poets and poems chosen, but the aim should be to ensure an in-depth engagement with the collection.

Links to the national curriculum and the primary national strategy (PNS)

This work relates to the requirement in the English national curriculum programme of study for reading: *a range of literature drawn from a variety of cultures and traditions; myths, legends and traditional stories* (8e and 8f).

It also connects with specific teaching objectives in the *PNS Framework for Teaching* for years 5 and 6 to do with reading and responding to texts from different cultures.

Anticipated outcomes

Based on their reading and discussions of the poems, children will:

- understand more about the universality of rhymes and language play and their social function
- have begun to think about the influence that geography, climate and the political environment can have on a country's literature
- be more aware of careful word choice in poetry, and of how words can create vivid images in the reader's mind
- appreciate how the structure of a poem supports its reading
- appreciate how each new reading of a poem yields up new meanings and responses.

Resources and preparation

- Map of region (the children could stick a copy inside their poetry journals for reference).
- Greetings in each language – children to research where possible from families/neighbours.
- A brief factsheet summarising the recent history of the region for class reference during the work. This can be added to and expanded in the form of sticky notes and current news items while reading the poems.

Teaching sequence

Reading traditional poems from different countries

Session 1: Fun and nonsense – exploring the universal nature of traditional, nonsense rhymes and riddles

Read 'Not a Very Mice Poem' (Latvia) and discuss links to familiar nursery rhymes, for example 'Pussycat, Pussycat where have you been?' and 'Three Blind Mice'. Discuss the origins of rhymes – many traditional rhymes have links with actual people or incidents in history (see www.rhymes.org.uk) – and ask the children to speculate about the origins of this one. Allocate two-line sections of the poem to different groups, who briefly discuss and decide on an interpretation. Reread the poem, first in parts and then together, as a whole class.

Give children a copy of 'Chant for a Child Who Is Hurt' (Estonia) without the title. Ask them to read it in pairs, and then prompt them to discuss the structure and speculate what function such a rhyme might have (it is a circular rhyme to distract a child who is in pain). Ask children to share other endless rhymes they know with the class, making links with their own experience of language/stories/rhymes used to, for example, soothe, reassure or send children to sleep.

Groups of six children work on one traditional poem to read aloud or perform to the rest of the class, with a brief introduction, for example:

- 'How a Pair of Spring Boots Were Bought' (Czech Republic)
- 'Animal Friends' (Latvia)
- 'To Say Aloud and Annoy Anyone Who Will Listen!' (Czech Republic)
- 'My Mad Granny' (Yugoslavia)
- 'Where Have You Been?' (Latvia)
- 'I Shall Tell a Silly Tale' (Czech Republic)
- 'Song' (Germany).

Discuss what makes rhymes like these endure, sometimes over hundreds of years – what features do these poems share? Begin to record features on a grid to be added to later, for example pleasure in sounds, playing with words, surreal images.

Session 2: A sense of time and place – providing a geographical and historical context for the poems

Share with the class a contemporary map of Europe and, where relevant, any personal experiences children may have, discussing the geography and the climate, especially the extreme cold in winter.

With the aid of an atlas, groups of children locate all the countries represented in the anthology, identifying their capital cities and other significant features.

Explain that by the end of the Second World War these countries were governed by the Soviet Union and that many people were prevented from leaving. After 1989 the restrictions were removed and the people in the different countries were able to govern themselves and travel to the West. Where relevant, make links with 20th-century history topics covered by the class, for example Britain since 1930.

On an enlarged map of the region, pin up labels with the names of the poems the children have read on the countries the poems come from. Continue to pin up poem labels as the work proceeds.

Session 3: Under the weather? How climate influences and shapes the poetry of a region

Read 'Snow' (Belarus) and share initial responses. Discuss the structure of the poem and how, for example, the repetition of the last two words in each stanza affects the reading. Talk about what the view from the poet's bedroom window would have been like, and which lines make it particularly vivid.

Read 'Praise Song of the Wind' (Siberia). Organise a class reading of the poem, with groups reading one verse each, keeping up the pace. Discuss how the poem celebrates the power of the wind, and how the structure of the poem helps to emphasise this power.

Organise the class into reading pairs and give each pair copies of two of the following poems:

- 'Walnut' (Hungary)
- 'Winter' (Czech Republic)
- 'The Bear's Dilemma' (Hungary)
- 'Summer Rain' (Bulgaria).

The poems should be surrounded by very wide margins. The partners read the poems to each other and discuss what they show about the countries they come from. They choose lines from the poems that create particularly vivid pictures and annotate each poem, focusing on how the choice of words in the poem creates these impressions.

Children share their work with pairs on another table or with the class. Add poem labels to the map.

Author study and own writing

Sessions 4 and 5: Miroslav Holub – getting to know a 20th-century Czech poet

Read 'The Door', encouraging the children to reflect on their initial responses. Discuss the door as metaphor – why is opening a door a good image to use in a poem? What does it make us think of? How do layout and repetition contribute to the impact of the poem?

Share something about the context of Holub's writing, for example biographical information from the Glasgow University website (www.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Holub.htm). Discuss with the class the dangers of openly criticising the state at the time when Holub was writing. Return to 'The Door' and ask whether knowing more about Holub's circumstances affects the way they read the poem.

Read 'Fairy Tale' and share responses. Which lines do the children like best and why? What kind of mood or atmosphere do they think this poem has? Is there anything they don't like or that puzzles them? Can they find any patterns in the poem, in the way it is written or in its ideas?

Read 'A Boy's Head' and ask the children, in pairs or groups of four, to respond to it using the same structure: likes, dislikes, puzzles, patterns. What does the last line of the poem mean? Pairs or groups then feed back to the whole class. Lead a discussion on the themes of the poems and the similarities between this poem and the previous ones. Look again at the structures of the poems – are they alike in any way? What do the children think of Holub's style of writing, and how would they describe his poetry?

Using a large outline of a girl's head or a baby's head note children's ideas of what they might find in this head. Write the beginning of a shared writing poem inspired by 'A Boy's Head'.

Sessions 6 and 7: Out into the wide world – using a poem to inspire children's own poetry writing

Children choose one of the Holub poems to use as a starting point for a poem of their own. Discuss with them how to go about it.

- Before they start to write they can make notes on what they are interested in writing about.
- They could also make a graphic plan of their poem.
- They should think about the shape of the poem – will it be structured like any of the Holub poems?
- How will they create images in their poem, as Holub does in his poetry?

Give children ample time to make notes and plans and discuss them with their writing partner before they begin to draft out their own poem.

Children share the drafts with a writing partner and redraft in the light of their advice.

At the end of session 7, children share completed poems with other pairs or the whole class, explaining any changes they made to their poem after the first draft. To round off this session, read aloud from an enlarged copy of 'For My Poems' by Marina Tsvetayeva. Discuss this poet's description of how it feels to write poems, then ask the children to compare this with their own feelings when they get an idea for a poem or finish a poem.

Class reading of one poem

Session 8: 'The Schoolmaster' – a poem by a 20th-century Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko

Read 'The Schoolmaster'.

- Encourage children to visualise and discuss in pairs what images are evoked. Ask them to comment on, for example, the location of the window, why the trees are white and where the poem is set
- In pairs, discuss whether their ideas have changed or been reinforced? Is the broken chalk significant? Why did he break it?
- In line 12 of the poem, 'We watched him with a different attention', who is the 'we' and what has made them attend to the schoolmaster in a different way?
- Discuss the end of the first stanza in pairs and then share responses with the class.
- Discuss the phrase 'creaking behind him' in pairs. How has the children's thinking developed with additional information – new queries, links (ask them to explain the significance of the cloakroom attendant)?

In mixed groups the children predict, describe or visualise the next scene in the poem, what will happen to the schoolmaster and where he will go. They represent the predictions graphically.

Share predictions.

Look at the end of the poem – how does this compare with children's predictions or visualisations? How does the poem make them feel? How is the feeling evoked? Can they link this to specific words or phrases? Discuss language features in the last stanza, for example alliteration

('snow falling on him softly through silence') and repetition ('clumsy', 'white', 'trees'). How does this affect the reading or the reader?

Session 9: Stepping into the world of the poem – writing in role

Reread the poem with the whole class, asking children to focus on what they learn about the schoolmaster.

Role on the wall (ie draw the outline of a figure on a board or flipchart to represent the schoolmaster). Discuss with children what they know or think they know about the schoolmaster. Make notes on the outer edges of the figure using evidence from text and then write, inside the outline, what children surmise about the schoolmaster.

Children use the information contained in the outline to write in role, for example:

- as one of the children in the class, a letter to a friend describing what happened at school that day
- a letter to the schoolmaster offering him advice
- as the schoolmaster writing a letter to the class explaining his actions.