

Title	Poetry in Action : A Method for Shared Poetic Understandings
Sub Title	詩を実践する：詩の理解を分かち合うための方法
Author	Young, Jerome
Publisher	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要刊行委員会
Publication year	2019
Jtitle	慶應義塾大学日吉紀要. 英語英米文学 (The Hiyoshi review of English studies). No.71 (2019. 3) ,p.97- 112
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	<a href="https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN10030060-20190331-0097">https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN10030060-20190331-0097</a>

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# Poetry in Action: A Method for Shared Poetic Understandings

Jerome Young<sup>1)</sup>

## Abstract

This paper is a summation of an experiment conducted with an Intensive English class at Keio University in the autumn semester 2017. The goal of the experiment was to show that it is possible to take Carolyn Graham's method<sup>2)</sup> of using music to teach English and extend it to a more abstract demanding topic, poetry. The experiment was filmed at the end of 2017, and, in February 2018, the results were presented with step-by-step video data to demonstrate how this method would work in the context of poetry, and how it could be utilized to foster poetic understandings among students. Poetry is seen as an archaic topic, one off the beaten path of a university student's normal education, particularly education involving second language acquisition. Though poetry may seem like an obtuse subject best left alone, what we show here is that it can be an important tool in helping students to get a sense of the natural rhythm of English and acquire deeper understandings and appreciation for poetry. The goal of the experiment was to see if this simple method (of clapping out a beat while vocalizing a poem) could make the learning of poetry fun and enjoyable while at the same time promoting the pedagogically useful goal of getting

students acclimated to the natural rhythm of spoken English.

### **Introduction**

Poetry is not for the faint of heart. Understanding a poem usually takes time. It is not as if when you read a poem you fully understand it, grasp its many layers of deep meaning (semantic, syntactic, phonological, or cultural) all at once. In this modern world we value results, and we value getting them quickly. With poetry, though, one of the lessons we learn is waiting, waiting for a deeper understanding to dawn on us at some indefinite time, in the future, maybe tomorrow, or the day after that, or a year or decade later. Because of this subjective aspect of poetry, it can have a deeply personal affect on a person, which is a qualitative experience and cannot be measured. For this reason, some people shy away from poetry. Because of its subjective nature, in the writing and reading of it, society may not give much value to it. Nevertheless, naysayers aside, poetry can be an important way for students to work together and share in learning something new — and, ultimately, something subjectively specific (immeasurable) to each student. As poetry is meant to be spoken, and as it is, by its nature, rhythmical, a simple method focusing on these two elements of the poetic can help students get a sense of a poem's inherent rhythmical logic, while making the learning a uniquely individual one. In this essay, it is argued that beginning on this simple level is the first step to helping students get a deeper understanding of any English poetry.

This essay is a brief report on an experiment using a simple method for learning poetry in the university classroom, specifically the English-as-a-second-language classroom. For some, poetry is seen as a useless pursuit with very little educational merit, very little that can help a student's career,

or their proficiency in English. Moreover, as interpreting a poem is seen as too difficult for the majority of native speakers, poetry is seen as having serious pitfalls for non-native speakers to comprehend. What we show here is a simple method for using poetry to further the aim of increasing student proficiency in speaking English naturally. The participants share in the learning experience in such a cooperative and compassionate way that they help each other to become more fluent in speaking English. Though this method emphasizes the spoken aspects of English, the foundation for a deeper understanding of a poem's meanings is therein established. The more repetition with the method, the more embodied in the student the poetic work becomes. The deeper the embodiment, the greater the chance for a deeper subjective understanding, at some point in the future, of a poem's underlying meanings. Through the act of practicing in groups, there is shared understandings between the students, too. Through seeing your peers do the exercises, they can see and hear how others execute the reading, and that can act to spur them on to achieve their own subjective understanding of the poem's inherent rhythmic logic and deeper shades of meaning. The results of this method are, therefore, two-fold. The immediate, short-term, effect is a greater fluency in spoken English and with it a sense of confidence, a sense of accomplishment, for having "mastered" a poem. The long-term effect, of a deeper understanding of the meaning of a poem, is more uncertain and, frankly, immeasurable — yet, such a long-term effect is possible. The most surprising aspect of using this simple method is that it makes the learning of poetry enjoyable. As Aristotle said in his *Poetics*, "to learn gives the liveliest pleasure ... to all in general"<sup>3)</sup> and this simple method makes it possible for students to experience the pleasure of poetry.

### Speaking English in Japan

A common refrain in Japan is that Japanese people cannot speak English well. This burden falls at the door of how English is taught to young people in Japan. Your average Japanese student entering university in Japan has had six years of English education. For the most part, English education in Japan consists of memorizing English vocabulary, learning English grammar, and translating English texts into Japanese. The goal of this education is to prepare students to take English exams and do well on them. In this context, spoken English is largely ignored and, for that reason, has led to the curious situation that after studying English for six years students lack confidence in their ability to speak English. A lot of students feel embarrassed by their lack of spoken proficiency and avoid, as much as possible, speaking English. This is unfortunate, but given the pedagogical emphasis here it is understandable.

As languages, students understand that Japanese and English are very different. The writing system (Kanji vs alphabet), the grammar, the reading system (from left vs. from right), and the vocabulary are obvious differences. In the Japanese schools, English language learning focuses on these elements because they are easy to test student progress and mastery. Less attention, frequently none, is paid to the differences of the languages as *spoken* forms of communication. This lack of emphasis on spoken English in English language education is evident in the persistence of a lack of confidence by many Japanese students of English in the *speaking* of the language. In fact, it is surprising the extent to which students are unfamiliar with the fundamental difference between these languages *as spoken*. Understanding the foundational differences between these two languages is crucial for fostering confidence in Japanese students' ability to use English

confidently socially. As a spoken language Japanese is based on syllables — the unit of sound (the syllable) does all the heavy lifting in the language. Spoken English, on the other hand, is a stress based language where the beat does all the heavy lifting in its spoken form.

Understanding how these two languages are different as spoken forms is important because unconscious linguistic influences effect how Japanese students go about speaking English. Since the two languages have a different foundation, this is not surprising. When a child is born in Japan, they learn to speak according to syllables — that’s the way the language is spoken. When that same child begins to speak English it is only natural that they would rely on that linguistic foundation, and say things like “I-e don-to supeku engurishu”. The pervasive use of Katakana-ized foreign words gives the impression that this is the way English words are pronounced, giving way to such odd words as “sa-ra-da” (salad). Even though most students are unfamiliar with this fundamental linguistic difference between how the languages are spoken, such an understanding can go a long way to helping develop confidence in speaking English. Without such an understanding, speaking English can be very confusing and stressful for them.

What is the most effective way to convey this fundamental difference? Explaining the linguistic theory is helpful, but a more immediate, experiential way, to grasp the difference is through music, through using songs in the classroom. This is nothing new — Carolyn Graham has published extensively on how music can be used to convey important linguistic lessons about English. Graham’s work targeted younger audiences, but her insights are equally valuable to an older university-age audience, to any age group for that matter. To target this more mature audience we adapted her method and chose songs from popular music to help the students learn the inherent rhythmical logic of spoken English that she taught her

younger audience, and then extended this simple method to poetry. After working with a song, they develop an intuitive sense of how English works rhythmically and we adapted the same approach to poetry. Using popular songs is easy because versions are available online for students to practice along with. With poetry, the situation is more challenging because there is no template to follow — students follow their own beat and chart their own course forward.

### **The Poetry in Action Experiment**

The goal of this experiment was to take Carolyn Graham's insight, that English can be learned effectively through song, and apply it to poetry. As this experiment was designed for a presentation to professors, I filmed the students using the method, in the autumn of 2017, and showed the results at the Keio University Faculty of Letters annual Forum, in February 2018. The participants were members of my freshman Intensive English class at Hiyoshi Campus. I told them about the project and asked them if they would participate — and they agreed, graciously. Of the three participants, two had some music background (classical piano and J-Pop guitar), and one had no musical training at all. They also agreed to be filmed. In total, we showed six film clips of one to two minutes each, with each showing the students actively engaged with song and poetry.

The experiment began by acclimating the students to using a simple clapped beat while reading an English text. We began with a popular song and then moved on to using the same simple beat with a poem. After the students became comfortable with the internal rhythmic structure of the poems, I asked them to read the poems without clapping the beat, which they were able to do fluently. In the presentation, the film clips did all the heavy lifting because seeing is, as people are wont to say, believing. In the

films you can see with your own eyes how well the students are doing and you can see how much fun they are having (there were lots of smiles and laughter). Obviously, for an academic journal, we cannot share these videos. However, what follows is an explanation of the thinking process we went through to guide the students through the experiment.

When selecting a song, the aim was to use one with a tight rhythm and not much of a melody. The goal is not to teach students how to sing, though they may learn something about that too. The goal is help them become more comfortable with English as a rhythmical spoken language. An integral part of the learning experience is getting students to use their bodies in the process. To this end, I find it important to have students clap out a beat because this helps them to get a better sense the rhythm of English. Moreover, by using the body in this way makes the learning experience a deeper one — it makes it more memorable because there is a physical memory included. By working in small groups, this experience becomes a coordinated, shared one. As the students struggle together to master any given song, they help each other and laugh together in the process. What each student gets out of each exercise will vary, but each will take with them a lasting impression, and a better understanding of how English is spoken, naturally.

When picking a song, sometimes familiarity is a factor to consider but it is not crucial to the exercise. The important factors of a song are (1) a simple rhythm and (2) a tight melody (that is, not much of a melody). The goal of the exercise is to help students develop a sense of comfort and confidence in speaking English so a song with a strong (demanding) melody is counter-productive for students with a limited musical, or singing, sense. For the purposes of this experiment I began by having the students learn Elvis Presley's song "Jailhouse Rock".<sup>4)</sup> It has a simple beat, and a "weak" melody





(one that emphasizes rap, rather than a musical sense of melody). The students are instructed to clap out the beat for the song while they “sing” the verses. There are many challenges in using this method. The first challenge is “finding the beat”, that is, synchronizing the words to the beat. I coach

√                      √                      √      √  
 The warden threw a party in the county jail.  
 √                      √                      √      √  
 The prison band was there and they began to wail.  
 √                      √                      √      √  
 The band was jumpin' and the joint began to swing.  
 √                      √                      √      √  
 You should've heard those knocked out jailbirds sing.

them through the first verse, and give them plenty of time to practice. The next challenge is pronunciation, and identifying, with each student, where their strengths and weaknesses are. Finally, there are important lessons about what it means to say English is a stress-based language — namely, that some beats consist of only one word, while others have two words, or three words, or more. What students need to learn is that no matter how many words fall within a beat the length of the beat is the same, which means that a beat with five words necessitates speaking those words quickly. Despite these challenges, one of the beauties of this method is that the students can control the tempo. To begin, I encourage them to go slowly, to use a slow tempo, and then, as they become more comfortable and confident with the song, to speed up the tempo — going all the way up to Elvis's speed which

is pretty fast.

After students became familiar with all the verses in this song, I then filmed them going through the song. For the purposes of this journal article I cannot show you the result. However, be that as it may, I can comment on some general takeaways from this exercise. First of all, they had to work together — by keeping the beat. What this means is that each student is listening to the others, they're paying more attention to each other. If the beat (the clapping) is not synchronized, then it will be immediately obvious to all involved. As each student is familiar with the song, each understands the internal challenges of the song — so, when anyone makes a mistake it frequently, more often than not, produces laughter. This laughter is of a specific kind — the students are not “looking down” on the student who made the mistake; rather, they understand the challenges, and are laughing with the student, and therefore encouraging the student to try hard. In fact, when a mistake is made it is the student who makes it that laughs first because they realize “I didn't do it right!”. Overall it is a very supportive learning environment. As an educator once said, “Laughing students learn” and I believe they learn through this experience.

The next step in this experiment was to select a poem for the students to use the same method with. That is to say, I asked them to clap hands for the poem in the same manner they used for the Elvis song — a pretty straight forward beat, one-and-two-and-three-and-four. When selecting a poem, and there is quite a variety to pick from, I chose one that had a discernible basic one-and-two-and-three-and-four beat. As English is a stress-based language, using any poem is possible, but many have unorthodox beats and those should be reserved for more advanced studies. For the purpose of the experiment, I chose one by E.E. Cummings.

maggie and milly and molly and may  
went down to the beach (to play one day)

and maggie discovered a shell that sang  
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and

milly befriended a stranded star  
whose rays five languid fingers were;

and molly was chased by a horrible thing  
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and

may came home with a smooth round stone  
as small as a world and as large as alone.

For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)  
it's always ourselves we find in the sea<sup>5)</sup>

First of all, I had the students find the beat and then practice it while they clapped out the beat. Once they felt comfortable, I then filmed them reciting the poem with the beat. After extensive practice with this exercise, I then asked them to read the poem again, but this time, without the beat (i.e. without the clapping). What we learn from the film of these two experiments is that the first helped the students to get a sense of the poems internal logic, the beat, the rhythm, and that helped them afterwards to recite the poem with their voices alone, and do so in a fluent manner. The “beat” exercise gave the students a deeper understanding and appreciation of the poem’s internal rhythmical logic and that gave them confidence to recite the poem without

clapping out a beat.

To further the goals of this experiment, we introduced the students to a different, yet simple, beat pattern: the tomp-stomp-clap-pause beat. The rhythm we chose is one students are very familiar with, namely the rock band Queen's song "We Will Rock You".<sup>6)</sup> The advantage of using this beat



is that the students know it — in part because Queen is popular in Japan but also because this beat is used in all major sporting events, which is to say that the song has a life of its own outside the medium of rock music. Like with the Elvis experiment, I had the students practice the beat and had them “sing” Queen's song. The song has more of a melody than Elvis's song but, because of its familiarity, the students were excited to try it.

The next step in the experiment was to select a poem to use with this simple stomp-stomp-clap-pause beat. To this end, we selected an old poem by William Blake because it seemed to lend itself to the beat.

Never seek to tell thy love,  
Love that never told can be;  
For the gentle wind doth move  
Silently, invisibly.

I told my love, I told my love,  
I told her all my heart,  
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears.  
Ah! she did depart!

Soon after she was gone from me,  
 A traveller came by,  
 Silently, invisibly:  
 He took her with a sigh.<sup>7)</sup>

In our reading, this Queen beat worked well, and, after showing the students how to do it, they were then encouraged to practice it. Once they felt comfortable with it, I then filmed them “doing” the poem. Likewise, after they did that, I asked them to recite the poem without clapping. Again, after they understood the beat, and were confident with the rhythm, they were able to read the poem naturally.

One may ask: Do the students ever understand the meaning of the poems or the songs by doing this exercise? For the purposes of this experiment, comprehension of the poem’s or song’s meaning was secondary. The primary goal was to help the students get a sense of English rhythm, English stress, and pronunciation. The truth is, they don’t have to understand the meaning of the text in order to “sing” or “recite” it naturally. Therefore, the song or poem comes first and the meaning will follow, at some point, in future. This is the normal way in which people learn songs, after all. When children sing a song like “London Bridge is Falling Down” they don’t need to know anything about London in order to be able to sing the song — if they want to know more about London, they can and will do so, at some point in the future. The point is to get the child, or student, comfortable with the song or poem. It is perfectly possible for university teachers to give assignments designed to get students to understand the lyrics or poems at some point, but they will develop an understanding of the song or poem by virtue of physically doing it. The goal of this experiment is not to get students to get an intellectual understanding of the text *per se* but, instead, to

help them get a physical understanding of the song or poem (through clapping and speaking, as a group). We should not underestimate how influential such a physical experience can be, particularly when it comes to poetry — our understanding of a poem can change over time, and having this physical experience as a foundation allows for that deeper understanding to grow of its own will, as the years go by.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this experiment showed that Graham's method can be extended to more complicated texts (poems) with promising results. As children, we have all learned songs without the slightest idea of what the songs mean — the goal is to get the children to speak, with fluency. University students want a little more substance in their lives and poetry, though seemingly out of reach for all those except the most determined, is a way to add some deep substance to their language learning. Judging from students' body language, it was easy to see that these experiments were effective because the students were enjoying themselves, they were enjoying their learning. So, though language study can be serious and heavy — translation, grammar, and vocabulary — it can also be enjoyable, even when using texts traditionally seen as difficult to interpret. Graham's method is a simple one and it enables students to deal with conceptually difficult texts and yet still have fun in the process. Having students tap out a beat, to a song or poem, is a gentle way to help them acquire an unconscious sense of the natural rhythm of spoken English.

Understanding poetry can be a confounding and confusing experience for native speakers and such difficulties are multiplied for second language learners. Yet, it doesn't have to be that way. Poetry's denotations are accessible but the connotations are usually elusive. Yet, poetry need not be

seen as a forbidden subject in the second language classroom. Although achieving an understanding of connotative nuance can take time to get a sense of it, it is possible to initiate that journey through this type of exercise. In fact, this is the natural way children learn songs and verse. As poetry is learned and experienced in an active learning environment, the connotative layer will reveal itself over time, as will the deeper more personally profound meanings and understandings.

### **Summary of the Steps in the Experiment**

1. Have students read lyrics and poems aloud without any prior instruction. The purpose of this is to gauge student proficiency but also to set a “marker” for them so that they can better recognize their progress in the learning.
2. Introduction to the method. Here we begin by explaining how English is a stress based language and that following the beat is vitally important for speaking English naturally. To acclimate them to the English beat, we tell them that they must clap out the beat with their hands and that, as it is a group exercise, they must do so together, in unison. At this point, the teacher must lead by “an” example — clapping the beat while reciting a lyric or a poem — in order to help familiarize students with the rhythmical logic of the English text. Although this simple method may sound childish, because it harkens back to the adult-child learning set of singing songs and verse, it is a valuable way to get students started on learning the inherent rhythmical logic of lyrics and poetry. By keeping the beat by clapping, the students are adding a physical dimension to the learning and that helps to deepen their understanding of a given lyric or poem.
3. An interesting aspect of this method is that it involves shared learning.

The first step is everyone “keeping the beat” together. Along the way, though, students share in other learnings, such as enjoying listening to the other students succeed or struggle in vocalizing the text rhythmically. Overall, the students will develop a rhythmical fluency in speaking English that can lead to a personal, growing sense of confidence. As each text is mastered, important linguistic lessons — in particular, the rhythm of spoken English — are established as a form of unconscious knowledge.

4. By the end of this exercise, students will also acquire some shared understandings, about English, about lyrics, about poetry, and quite possibly about life. At the very minimum, students begin to understand how English and rhythm are connected. After the initial introduction, the teacher will play a limited role in the students’ learnings. By the end, after sufficient practice clapping the beat while reading a poem, students develop a sense of how to read poetry and can do so with fluency (and do so still with individuality). After they have developed confidence, they are then able to recite a poem rhythmically and naturally without without having to clap out the beat. This is an easy, gentle way to increase student confidence in speaking English. Moreover, as it is poetry, it contributes to their general understandings of life and emboldens their curiosity to learn more.

## **Notes**

- 1) Jerome Young is a foreign lecturer at Keio University. He wishes to express kind thanks to Dr. Yoshiko Uzawa for encouraging this research on poetry, and to Dr. Atsushi Iguchi for his insightful feedback on the early stages of this project. He wishes also to express his sincere thanks to Ms. Riho Takagi, Ms. Reina Miyamoto, and Ms. Miyu Takefuta for their participation in the project and for allowing me to film their readings to share with other faculty at the annual Faculty of Letters Forum in 2018.



- 2) Cf. Carolyn Graham. 1978. *Jazz Chants: Rhythms of American English for Students of English as a Second Language*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- 3) Aristotle. 1997. *Poetics*. Tr. S.H. Butcher. New York. Dover Publications, Inc.: 6.
- 4) Elvis Presley. "Jailhouse Rock". RCA Victor, 1957. 45rpm single.
- 5) E.E.Cummings. 1958. *95 Poems*. New York. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.: 10.  
Though this poem may look like it is poorly edited, that is not the case. The odd spacing and punctuation is a feature of Cummings' poem. This is an example of him taking license with the written word.
- 6) Queen. "We Will Rock You". *News of the World*. EMI-Elektra, 1977. Vinyl record.
- 7) William Blake. 1992. "Love's Secret" in *Great Love Poems*. New York. Dover Publications, Inc.: 52–53.