Rhymes and poems can be a natural starting point for young children as they experience the world and learn to understand spoken, written, and visual languages. Poetry contains highly patterned, predictable language that has unique potential to promote memorable and pleasurable experiences in preschool, kindergarten, and primary classrooms. Rather than using language just to transmit a message, poetic devices like sound play, figurative meaning, ambiguous pronoun references, unusual sentence structures, and the graphic pattern of short lines on the page, use language to slow down the reading process and invite readers to pay attention to the words themselves (see “Poetry Terms” and “About Poetry,” p. 54).

As children gain literacy skills in the primary grades, they build on knowledge of spoken language, which is invisible and temporary, to explore written language, which is visible and more permanent. Age-appropriate experiences with poetry can increase young children's attention to the many possible uses and techniques of language. Awareness of language is a key to literacy learning, but an overemphasis on one aspect of language awareness—phonemic awareness—sometimes limits educators' views of the broader picture. In this article I explore the value of poetry experiences for promoting young children's language awareness, with phonemic awareness as one part of that learning process, and I share two teachers' classroom approaches.

**Poetry Terms**

- **alliteration**: Repetition of one or more initial sounds in words (where the Grickle Grass grows).
- **assonance**: Repetition of vowel sounds that falls short of rhyme (lay them straight).
- **couplet**: A pair of adjacent rhyming lines.
- **line**: A spoken or written unit consisting of a breath unit and/or regular patterns of beats, rhyme, or other sound play.
- **poetry**: Language that calls attention to itself as language in order to be entertaining or memorable; often contains structural repetition, sound play, bold images, and figurative language.
- **refrain**: A repeated line or phrase (. . . I like best).
- **rhyme**: Repetition of sounds at the end of syllables (One, two/buckle my shoe).
- **rhyme pattern**: Repetition of end-rhymes in stanzas.
- **rhythm**, **beat**, **meter**: All refer to patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line (e.g., Snow in the east/snow in the west are two-beat lines).
- **sound play**: The use of sounds within words to organize the poem and affect the reader.
- **stanza**: A group of lines separated from others by a line space.
- **structural repetition**: Patterns that organize poems.
From phonemic awareness to language awareness

Phonemic awareness is the understanding that spoken words can be divided into discrete sounds, called phonemes (for example, ship = /sh//i//p/) (see Yopp & Yopp 2009). It is a key component in connecting written letters and their sounds. This ability supports young children as they learn to read and write.

But phonemic awareness alone is not sufficient to allow children to become proficient readers and writers. Language awareness is the broader understanding that (1) language is composed of words, sentences, and larger units that serve important personal, social, and academic functions; (2) words are composed of sounds, syllables, and letters; (3) words have multiple meanings, depending on where they are used; and (4) language is an interesting and important subject of study. As children learn about written language and its uses and forms, shared reading of various genres with parents, teachers, and other caregivers serves as the foundation for their own independent reading. In learning to read and write, children learn to orchestrate and balance four systems related to language use: the connection between letters and sounds (graphophonological system), expected sentence structures (syntax), word meanings (semantics), and real-life language uses (pragmatics) (Pappas & Pettigrew 1998). And as the pioneer teacher-researcher Don Holdaway (1979) stressed, familiar, predictable, pleasurable texts are important scaffolds for emerging readers and writers.

Reading, rereading, performing, and discussing poetry promotes young readers’ and writers’ language awareness. On the phonological (sound) level, poetry includes many types of sound repetition: rhyme, alliteration, assonance. On the syntactic level, poetry provides sentence frames and refrains. It can contain nonstandard grammar (“I ain’t never gonna spend it”). It also provides the challenge of unfamiliar syntax, such as subject-verb reversal (“falls a raindrop”) and verb ellipsis (“sunshine fading”). On the semantic level, poetry offers a rich repertoire of vocabulary, especially that related to the senses, and patterns of words that “go together” as opposites, sequences, cause-effect, part-whole, and other relationships. On the pragmatic level, poems fulfill functions of pleasure and social bonding as well as language play.

How teachers share poems with young children

Many accounts of poetry in primary grade classrooms (e.g., Duthie & Zimet 1992; Strickland & Strickland 1997) show teachers leading a variety of activities, from the intuitive to the analytical, from nurturing aesthetic sensitivity to exploring poetic techniques. Typical activities involve encouraging children to listen to, recite, read, and write poems; to respond through talk and visual arts; and to explore thematic connections.

A colleague and I studied the literature practices of 10 veteran K-4 teachers in several midwestern schools. All of the teachers routinely used literature in the classroom and received no other instructions than to share poems with the children as they normally would. We found that teachers read poems aloud to their students differently than they did stories: more slowly and with more expression, often rereading poems in a single sitting and encouraging children to participate in reading along (Elster & Hanauer 2002). Teachers seemed to naturally emphasize the enjoyment of poetry as language and performance.

Some teachers in our study were especially strong at using poetry experiences to build children’s awareness of language. In the excerpts below, Mr. Porter reads Eve Merriam’s poem “Snow in the East” (1988, p. 27) with his first grade class, and Mrs. Light discusses Merriam’s “You Be Saucer” (1988, p. 1) with her second grade class. “Snow in the East” is a 20-line lyric of five stanzas with two-beat lines, an abcb rhyme pattern, and a refrain of “I like best.” As the following transcript of his poetry reading shows, Mr. Porter engaged children in a pointing routine during his first reading, allowing them to participate nonverbally in a fast-paced reading of the poem even before they had learned the words. (Spoken words and syllables that are italicized in the transcript indicate emphasis by the speaker.)
Mr. Porter: Let’s do a real short one in here (turns the pages of the book) that’s a little bit about the weather. Remember some of the songs we learned so far. “This land is your land, this land is my land, from . . .”

Children: “California”
Mr. P.: “to the . . .”
Children: “New York island.”

Mr. P.: Okay, now. That’s as far as we need to go. Do you remember which way we point? Which way do we point for California?
Children: (point to a sign saying “West,” posted on the appropriate wall)
Mr. P.: Okay, California’s that way (points). Way out west.
Children: West.
Mr. P.: Which way do we point for New York?

Jimmy: East.

Children: (point to the “East” sign posted on the eastern wall)
Mr. P.: That’s that way (points). That’s way out east. We’re in the middle. Now, you’re going to need to know those directions, because you’re going to have to point in this poem. Let’s do the first part. If I say, “Snow in the east,” where would you point?

Children: (point in different directions)
Mr. P.: Joey’s got it right. “Snow in the west, . . .”

Children: (point in different directions)
Mr. P.: That’s that way (points toward the west). Now, it’s nice to have snow in the east and snow in the west, because people like to go skiing. But this is going to tell us where this little girl likes to have snowflakes (shows the picture). “Snow in the east, . . .”

Children: (point)

Mr. P.: “Snow in the west, . . .”

Children: (point)

Mr. P.: “Snow on my eyelashes (points to his eye) . . .”

Children: (point to their eyes)

Mr. P.: I like best.” Did you ever have a snowflake land on your eyelashes?

Children: Yeah!

Mr. P.: What happened?

Sarah: It tickles.

Aidan: It melts.
Mr. Porter uses the word *part* to refer to a stanza of a poem. Mrs. Light, on the other hand, uses terms like *beat*, *line*, and *stanza* when discussing Eve Merriam’s poem, “You Be Saucer,” with her second grade class. The poem is a 12-line lyric of three stanzas with two beat lines, an *abcb* rhyme pattern, and a “You be x and I’ll be y” sentence pattern. Unlike Mr. Porter’s choreographed reading, this discussion is more open-ended, building on Mrs. Light’s questions.

**Mrs. Light:** Do you like this poem (*points to the poem)*?

**Children:** Yeah!

**Mrs. L.:** What is it that you like about it?

**Whitney:** It rhymes good.

**Mrs. L.:** Where does it rhyme?

**Amy:** Night and tight.

**Max:** Good and night.

**Mrs. L.:** Do good and night rhyme?

**Children:** (do not respond, but continue to raise their hands)

**Mrs. L.:** They kind of go together, but they don’t rhyme. What else rhymes in this poem?

**Philip:** Pears and stairs.

**Kelly:** Cup and up.

**Mrs. L.:** You notice anything interesting about the words that rhyme here? Tessa?

**Tessa:** They’re all in the same place.

**Light:** What place are they?

**Tessa:** Um ... first [unclear] cup [unclear]. Second [unclear] last [unclear].

**Mrs. L.:** Okay. So the first rhyming word is at the end of the second line, always. And then where is the word that it rhymes with? Where is the next rhyming word?

**Tessa:** At the bottom of the last line.

**Mrs. L.:** So you noticed that this poem has rhyme in it, okay? At the end of the second line and the end of the fourth line. What else do you notice? Derek?

**Derek:** You can imagine it.

**Mrs. L.:** Tell me what you imagine.

**Derek:** Where it says, in the second stanza, I can imagine a pear tree with a whole bunch of pears on it. And on the first stanza, I can imagine a cup and saucer sitting on the table. And on the last one, I can imagine the mom tucking in the kid.

**Mrs. L.:** Good. What else? Sadie?

**Sadie:** Like, *saucer* and *cup* go together. And pears are in a tree. And you say good night.

**Mrs. L.:** Okay, so you’ve noticed in the first two lines that *saucer* and *cup* go together, and that *trees* and *pears* go together, and *good* and *night* go together (*points to the words on the poster*). That’s great. What else? Edward?

**Edward:** I notice that you can find the title in the last stanza.

**Mrs. L.:** Very good. (reads) “You be good, I’ll be night.” Excellent.

**Edward:** On the first stanza, it begins with “You be”; in the second it begins with “You be”; and in the third, it begins with “You be.”

**Mrs. L.:** Okay. You see another pattern. What else? Carrie?

**Carrie:** I see that they repeat that two times, and on all the stanzas [unclear].

**Mrs. L.:** Good. They’re repeating the word or words on the third lines; they’re repeating them twice. You noticed many things that I didn’t notice. And I’ve read it many, many times. I started out by asking what you liked about the poem. Are you telling me that you like the pattern?

**Children:** Yeah.

Like many teachers, Mrs. Light begins discussions of poems by asking children for an aesthetic response—what they like about the poem—rather than asking what it means. Mrs. Light uses the children’s response to explore rhymes and where they occur in the poem. The teacher’s open-ended questions allow children to have extended turns of talk and to bring up the images the poem evokes, words that go together semantically, the *you-I* sentence patterns, and the repeated phrase in the third line of each stanza. Mrs. Light notes the children’s attention to language and emphasizes that even after many readings, there are still things to discover in poems. She concludes by linking the notion of language patterns with the pleasure that readers get from poems.
Both Mr. Porter and Mrs. Light give children opportunities to appreciate, participate in, and talk about highly patterned language. The children learn to participate verbally and nonverbally and to consider both the forms and the content of poems.

**Children explore “What is a poem?”**

After K–2 children had read poems and prose stories with their teachers and on their own, we researchers asked them about differences between poems and stories. Their responses showed their developing understanding of the differences between poetry and prose. Daniel, a kindergartner, said, “A poem is a song and a story isn’t. A poem is shorter. Poems are music. Poems you sing and stories you don’t.” Jessie, grade 1, said, “This [points to “Snow in the East”] is like a poem. But sometimes you can read it just without the poem. Just go like [reads slowly and with stress], ‘Snow in the east.’ But not with the little song that comes with it.”

We asked children if all poems rhyme. Some agreed—“Yes, all of them do,” said Matthew, grade 2—while others disagreed—“No, not all of them,” said Jackie, grade 2. David, a first-grader, noticed repeated words at the beginning of lines: “This [points to “Snow in the East”] is a poem because it’s got these words [points to the repeated line beginnings]. And that [points to the book Rain Song] is a story because it’s got words in it. It doesn’t repeat the same words like this [points to the lines in “Snow in the East”].”

Children agreed that poems are shorter in length than stories. Emily, grade 2, said, “[A poem’s] not as long as a story would be, and [a story’s] longer. There are more words on one page than like poems.” Children pointed out that poems were written in shorter lines than prose, but they were uncertain about why this was so. Carter, grade 2, said, “Poems sometimes don’t go all the way to the end. They stop in the middle.” When we asked, “Why don’t they write across the whole page?” Carter replied, “Because it would be a story.” Jackie, grade 2, explained, “So they have more room for bigger pictures,” while Emily, also grade 2,
speculated, "Maybe they don’t want you to think it’s one long sentence. Maybe they are trying to make you think they are pages."

These answers show an emerging ability to speak about formal and functional differences between poetry and prose. The children who emphasized performance stated that poems are sung, not just read. The children who emphasized formal features highlighted rhyme, repeated words, shorter text overall, and shorter lines than prose.

By talking to children about poems and other texts, teachers can discover and promote children’s developing understanding of language forms and functions. And by doing so, they also model and practice the vocabulary (poem, prose, beat, rhyme) used to talk about poems and other types of language.

**Teaching practices**

The teachers who participated in our study routinely read poems more slowly and emphatically than prose, emphasizing formal features and pleasurable language. They read poems repeatedly and engaged children in performance, participation, and discussion and response. They included children’s families and cultures. (See “Poems to Share with Young Children.”)

**Performance.** Read poems slowly and with attention to the beat and the breaths that underlie the lines of poems. This lets children and teachers increase their awareness of and pleasure in language. Poems ask to be read repeatedly, and each rereading gives children insights into language, its uses, and its possible meanings.

**Participation.** As teachers read poems aloud and children pick up on the patterns within them, it seems natural for children to chime in. Children enjoy hearing favorites

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**About Poetry**

Before writing was invented, poetry was literature. Because poetry was an orally transmitted literature, its creators sought to maximize memorization and oral performance.

Poetic resources include sound effects (rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and others), unusual sentence patterns, and multiple word meanings, including secondary meanings, metaphor, personification, and other effects. Poems often contain striking imagery, storytelling, and structural repetition at many levels. Written poems have a graphic layout of words, lines, and stanzas that accentuate their formal features. Poets use techniques like these to draw the attention of readers, writers, listeners, and speakers beyond the message that language conveys to the language itself.

As memorable language, poetry is ideal for transmitting cultural knowledge. Proverbs, another form of oral folklore, use poetic resources like rhyme, alliteration, and semantic contrast to be memorable: "Haste makes waste," "Look before you leap," "Don’t make a mountain out of a mole hill." Rhymes, songs, lullabies, and poems have always existed in all cultures alongside prose stories, to transmit cultural knowledge and to provide shared words that can be spoken on important occasions.

Poetry is not a genre, like stories or informational texts, but a mode of language that contrasts with everyday prose because it has a regular beat or other formal organizing pattern. This pattern augments the message that the words convey. Poems may tell stories or impart information. Poetry is rooted in the rhythmic movements of the breath and the body in ways that ordinary prose is not. The most often-read poems today are usually short and lyric, conveying human experience in condensed or playful language; but longer, narrative, informational, and hybrid poems are becoming more plentiful (see “Poems to Share with Young Children”).

The personal, lyrical voice of poetry is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the impersonal, logical voice of prose essays. Because poetry is a condensed language of image and sound pattern, a large part of the aesthetic pleasure of poetry, like that of a play or a song, is in its performance. Poems and rhymes are a good starting point for young children who are moving from unconscious to conscious understandings of language, from using language as a tool to talk about the world to language as an object of attention and study in its own right. Poetry can satisfy a young child’s search for pleasure, pattern recognition, and play, and the opportunity to take part in poetry performance can make literature and learning personal and concrete.
repeatedly and participating even more. Try using an oral cloze technique—pause at a point where a language pattern permits children to predict what will come next (as demonstrated by Mr. Porter). This technique invites children to participate in reading along with an adult long before they read on their own. Encourage verbal and nonverbal participation. Read poems again and again to invite new, more complex ways for children to join in.

Discussion and response. Poems challenge and stretch a child's knowledge of word meanings and sentence patterns, and their knowledge of the sounds and syllables of spoken language and their connection to letters. Mrs. Light's open-ended "What Do You Notice?" technique invites children to share observations of all types. Teachers can expand and use these observations as teachable moments. Word study, word maps, and "Favorite Words" lists or posters are ways to focus on powerful words and their meanings.

Another strategy is to create a poem mix-up. Write a familiar poem on sentence strips. Cut it into sections, then mix them up and display them using a pocket chart. This gives children the opportunity to recognize and talk about patterns and for teachers to listen.

Family and cultural connections. Invite children and their families to share their oral culture: rhymes, songs, sayings, and proverbs. These can be written down, practiced, and discussed with children. Plan a family culture event, where families are invited to recite favorite rhymes and poems as well as stories. This can be a great way to include children's cultures, especially when combined with food. In their discussions of poems, adult and child readers may imagine the situation or "world" implied by a poem, as Derek did in Mrs. Light's class. They may connect the world in the poem to the family and school worlds they inhabit and to other media they consume (books, TV shows, websites, and so on) (Elster 2000).

Conclusion

Age-appropriate poetry experiences promote young children's language awareness. Through repeated attention to language that is rich and personally meaningful, teachers and children study language while learning about the self and the world. Children build their understanding of written language, its parts, and its connection to spoken language from attention to sounds, syllables, words, and sentences.

Use poetry in the classroom to emphasize the meaningful experiences of poetry—group performance, interest in words and their meanings, discovery of the resources of language. To reduce poetry to a tool for learning about sounds would be a disservice to poetry and to children's learning needs. Our goal as teachers is to support children's awareness of the sounds, letters, and especially the meanings of words and their awareness of the importance of oral and written language for human collaboration.

References


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