

A Multitude of Languages

by Elizabeth Brown

“Without translation, we would be living in provinces bordering on silence.” –George Steiner

Genre: Poetry

Objective: To encourage students to write in and/or incorporate different languages into their poems.

Educational Level: Junior High, High School

Time Frame: One hour, but this could easily be extended into two sessions

Prior knowledge: None

Materials: container, index cards

Literary model: Hand out (and/or project) printed copies of the poems “In the Midst of Songs” by Ofelia Zepeda, “Wind, Water, Stone” (“Viento, Agua, Piedra”) by Octavio Paz, “Never Alone” by Francisco X. Alarcón, and “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll

Optional: add a waka by Princess Shikishi (d. 1201)

Sequence of Activities:

Listening, thinking and talking about the poems (20-25 minutes)

Hand out (or project) printed copies of the poem “In the Midst of Songs” by Ofelia Zepeda, then listen to a recording of her reading the poem in O’odham and in English:

<https://voca.arizona.edu/track/id/59708>

<https://broadsidepress.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/130-Songs.pdf>

- Mention how Dr. Zepeda translates her own work and lead a discussion about the poem. Did the students enjoy the sounds and rhythms of the original language?

Hand out (or project) printed copies of Octavio Paz’s “Wind, Water, Stone” in English and in the original Spanish, “Viento, Agua, Piedra”:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/58334/wind-water-stone>

<https://ryepoetrypath.ryelibrary.org/viento-agua-piedra/>

- If there are students who speak Spanish, have one of them read the poem in Spanish. Then have another student read the English translation. What do students think about these versions?

Have a student read or listen to Ada Limón read “Never Alone” by Francisco X. Alarcón:

<https://home.nps.gov/media/video/view.htm?id=669093B2-2D1B-456E-8E18-A8F65B503D34>

- Note the use of the Spanish “corazón” coming at the end of a list of English words. What does “corazón” mean? What is the effect of adding a Spanish word to the poem?

(If time permits, look at a Princess Shikishi poem or others/another of your choice. I like to point out that in Japanese, there are three alphabets: hiragana, katakana, and kanji, or Chinese characters. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Princess_Shikishi)

Read (or have a student read) “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42916/jabberwocky>

- Ask the students what language the poem is written in. Often they will guess all sorts of random languages—Old English? Norwegian?—before realizing the poem is filled with nonsense words. Lead a discussion of how invented words can work in a poem.

Drawing Words from a Container (15 minutes)

I ask students to think of a word or phrase from another language (real or imagined) and write it on an index card (with the English translation). After writing, they should fold the card in half. (Students don’t need to write their names on the cards.) I then collect the cards into a container, mix them up, and ask for a volunteer to pick a card at random. The students are usually excited and almost all of them raise their hands, wanting to discover what their classmates have written. A student volunteer draws out a folded card, opens it, reads it (or I read it), and then I write the word/phrase on the board. What language is this? We wonder together. I’ve had Korean, Kinyarwanda, Farsi, Spanish, O’odham, French, German, and nonsense words, among others. I often ask the students for assistance on how to pronounce these words, and they are glad to help! This can go on for a while, so, depending on time, I leave the rest of the words in the container and move on to the writing component.

Try to write a poem in another language, or with a word(s) from another language (real or imagined) (20-25 minutes)

Students can use a word or phrase from the white board or consider one of the poems we read for inspiration, if needed. If their poem is completely in another language, I encourage them to add their own English translation.

As students are writing, I continue to draw out index cards from the container and copy the words and translations onto the white board. (This can also be done at a later time.)

This class was inspired by a student who expressed a longing for the language and culture of her home.