

THE LIMERICK AND THE SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNER

By Emilio G. Cortez

A form of light verse that many children find appealing is the limerick. In this article, several limericks will be presented in addition to suggestions for the use of the limerick in the second-language class.

Consider the following limerick.

There once was a bird from Rome
that flew a long way from home.
It crossed the sea
with a bumblebee.
At least it wasn't alone.

After the presentation of difficult words, phrases, and structures; comprehension questions may be introduced. The teacher has the option of having students respond orally and/or in writing. Sample questions for the limerick above might include:

1. Where did the bird live?
2. How did the bird travel from its home?
3. Which word means the same as was not?
4. What did the bird fly over?
5. Was the bird all alone?
Explain your answer.

The limerick can also be used to generate different forms of language in keeping with the controlled composition technique.

There once was a boy named Lou
who tried things people can't do.
He would try and try
to reach for the sky
He couldn't--but neither can you!

The gist of this limerick could be re-written as follows:

A boy named Lou tried something impossible. Lou tried to reach for the sky, but he couldn't do it.

By contrasting a limerick with its prosaic equivalent, aspects of style and paraphrasing can be presented and discussed.

The limerick can also be used effectively with the snap-reading approach.

Snap-reading requires that the teacher read orally at normal speed, stop, and snap his fingers, which alerts a student to read the next word. The teacher resumes reading, stops, and snaps his fingers again. A different student reads the next word, and so on. It is suggested that nouns and main verbs comprise the majority of snap options to be read by the students.¹

Several limericks for classroom use will now be presented.

There once was a mouse named Nat
who used to steal food from a cat.
Nat stole a bun--
But forgot to run.
And that was the end of that.

There once was a man in a store
whose dime fell to the floor.
It dropped in a crack;
Now he can't get it back.
He's not going there anymore!

There once was a man with a cold
whose story has never been told.
With one mighty sneeze,
He blew down some trees.
And they rolled, and rolled,
and rolled.

There once was a bird in a tree
who always said, "Hey, look at me!"
His friends on the ground
Looked up and frowned
Because there was nothing to see.

In summary, the use of the limerick in the second-language class has a sound rationale. More specifically:

1. The limerick's brevity and its recurrent rhyme scheme help to preclude students' tedium.

¹Emilio G. Cortez, "Snap Reading", RELC Journal, Vol. 6, No. 1 (June, 1975), p.17.

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2. The humor inherent in many limericks is very appealing to young second-language learners.
3. The limerick can be used in conjunction with the snap-reading technique.
4. The limerick can be readily memorized and afford students extensive oral practice in a pleasurable way.
5. The limerick can be used to contrast and to discuss different aspects of writing style.