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## 7.9 The multimodal approach to using poetry in ELT

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### Introduction

This session explored how a multimodal approach allows teachers to use poetry as a means of developing students' language proficiency. Multimodality is defined as

the crafted integration of two or more ways, or modes, of communication, so that their combined meaning as a whole is greater than either mode separately or their simple combination.

(Dressman 2010: 71)

It usually, but not exclusively, involves the use of digital technology and during this session the potential of such tools as a means of not only teaching English but also as a way of engaging digital natives was discussed.

### Video poems

The visual is given a lot of importance by the literature on pedagogy and some consider it to be the key to student engagement (Kress 2003). For example, in my experience, video poems do make a difference to student engagement; the opportunities they afford for discussion, critical thinking and collaboration mean that students are not only honing their linguistic skills but a host of other literacies as well. This seems to tally with research conducted in the USA and in the UK with ESL students, which identified a number of benefits to the act of using video poems in the classroom. These benefits are not solely of a linguistic nature even though video poems can provide students with a means of developing their language proficiency and making them more active readers.

### Audio recordings and podcasts

Audio recordings of poetry have, of course, long existed and thus there is nothing really new about poets recording their poems. However, the internet has allowed teachers and students to gain access to a huge number of poetry recordings and to use them during their English lessons. Both the *Poetry Archive* and *poets.org* are highly popular collections of such recordings and they have the added advantage of offering teachers a wealth of teaching ideas.

Digital technology makes it easier for students not only to record their own poems or thoughts about poetry but also to publish these online in the form of podcasts, thus motivating students by providing them with a real audience. The Poetry Foundation

serves as a good model of how to go about it, while there is a variety of websites that allow students to create podcasts and publish them online and thus reach a wider audience. Research seems to suggest that students not only develop a strong engagement with poetry by means of podcasts but they also enhance a variety of language skills, especially speaking and listening.

### **Hypertext**

A hypertext is, simply put, a text that is linked to other texts by means of hyperlinks. When adapted for the purposes of teaching language via poetry it allows students to create dynamic texts that, in a way, cease being linear. When a traditional print poem is transformed into a hypertext or when students write a hypertext poem, the latter is opened up by means of a number of hyperlinks that illustrate how the students have interpreted the imagery and diction in the poem while engaging in textual and linguistic experimentation. Thus the resulting poem does not have a definite sense of direction. It can be read in a variety of ways and readers can choose where they want to go. According to recent research this element of reader empowerment is the main value of hypertext poems.

### **Wikis**

Wikis are a great way of encouraging students to collaborate in writing and editing poetry. There exist a number of very popular poetry wikis that are specifically aimed at ESL students and some of them are characterised by the fact that they devote a substantial amount of room to what students can gain in linguistic terms from the reading of poetry. It is relatively easy for a teacher to set up a poetry wiki; by reserving a section of the wiki for language games, students can be encouraged to develop an increased awareness of language while reading, writing and discussing poetry. Moreover, studies show that wikis not only help students to bolster their language skills but they also make teachers more confident writers.

### **Conclusion**

Multimodality allows teachers to harness poetry as ‘an organic, enriching communication tool’ (Dymoke 2009: 80). However, despite all the advantages of a multimodal approach, teachers are still the most significant factor when it comes to language teaching. Digital technology has the potential to make the language learning experience a more engaging one and to lift poetry off the printed page, but it is certainly no panacea.

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