

Language Development and Creative Expression Through Nonsense Verse

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Abstract

The present article examines the development of language skills through unconventional expression as used in the nonsense verse of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. It analyzes student reaction to and comprehension of these readings from an extratextual perspective prior to instructor-led readings and peer interpretation exercises. Student exercises to be examined include presumed definitions of nonsense vocabulary prior to reading as well as theorized meanings based on contextual information realized upon full review of the text. Paratextual information pertaining to the readings are shared to explore the challenges of teacher-led discussions of the extant artistic and colloquial language and determine whether or to what degree presentation of this material is effective for language building. The study acknowledges the limitations of L2 studies without grounded, standardized vocabulary, but notes that language has a tendency to rapidly evolve and provides case studies of elevated colloquialisms, coined words/phrases, and non-standard expressions in common use. It concludes that the often untaught expressions, idioms, and dialect contained in this type of material provides holistic value to language learning via cultural context.

Keywords: Language, Literature, Nonsense Verse, Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll

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Introduction

Extensive reading practices in the language classroom may take many forms, but often for lower-level language learners the material is kept rather simple. Those students who have yet to master a functional level of English require an easy entry into their studies and therefore are often provided with graded readers that have limited vocabulary and use fairly straightforward sentence structure following simple grammar rules. Textbooks for English discussion and communication classes tend to follow similar designs with a tendency for units to cover such topics as introductions, describing food, and giving/receiving directions around town. These basic entryways to language practice are commonplace and useful.

Concern arises, however, in the extent of such simplicity and their applicability to young adult students. Many of these basic texts are lacking in the human element insofar as they do not aid in discussion of complex thought, culture, philosophy, or other issues inherent to the human condition. Therefore, to expand student access to a more holistic collection of cultural and philosophical thought, the classes being presented in this project were exposed to an array of poetry ranging in difficulty and degree. For the purposes of the present study, I have chosen to focus on efforts using the nonsense verse poetry of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Students in this study were introduced to the texts, given pre-reading discussion questions revolving around the themes of the poems. They were then guided through close readings and provided with post-reading discussion questions to gauge their reactions and comprehension (see Appendix A). At the end of the project, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire assessing their initial concerns with the project, what they learned, and whether they felt the material was useful (see Appendix B).

Students involved with the present study were low to moderate level freshman English Culture & Writing students at Daito Bunka University in Saitama, Japan. Many of the students had yet to take the TOEIC exam and expressed concern about their conversation and comprehension abilities. The classes in question would ordinarily use basic introductory text material but students were able to follow along with simple lectures and brief discussion questions. It should be noted that the material used for this study – the poetry of Lear, Carroll, and many others – had been used in other classes at other universities as well, usually with students of moderate to advanced language skills and often higher grade levels and other course contexts.

Theory

My goal with this project was similar to that of David I. Hanauer (2012) as he worked with his students to write poetry, attempting to be practical while focusing on “the aim of language learning: facilitating personally meaningful expression.” In my past experiences with communication classes, a lot of time had been spent with guidance through the fundamentals of vocabulary, grammar, and other functional aspects of the language. This is all fine, of course, but these practices have a tendency to stray from the human element. Also like Hanauer, I attempted to restructure the class focus away from “an emphasis on a decontextualized and managerial learning process towards an understanding of the presence of a living, historically situated, individual human being at the center of the language learning process.” (p. 106). It has long been my concern that many introductory textbooks, while practical, do not allow for such a close and “living” experience with the language. In my estimation, language education at any level should revolve around the human experience via

cultural and philosophical contexts, which is achievable through the use of poetry and other forms of literature.

Where Hanauer and I differ, however, is largely in execution. Hanauer's work led to students writing poetry in the target language as an end goal of their extensive studies. This is an intriguing exercise, one which I have attempted to replicate in prior classes to varying degrees of success. The classes referenced in the present study were unfortunately of a basic introductory English comprehension level and therefore any attempt at composition would have been far too extreme a challenge.

Application

Challenges are, nevertheless, ever present in the EFL classroom as, for the most part, lessons tend to be conducted primarily in the target language. This often adds to the difficulties of beginner-level students and/or those who lack confidence in their abilities to follow along with the details of instruction. This very much proved to be an issue in the early stages of my poetry reading classes in an L2 context as it required a great deal of scaffolding and other preparatory efforts for the students. Poems were therefore presented as a discussion of themes as opposed to a rigorous adherence to the text itself. Student discussion of the material was conducted in pre-exposure & post-exposure phases wherein students could learn about the authors, study and practice using some key vocabulary, and discuss generalized topics related to the readings themselves. The modes of engagement – student discussion and close reading of the text and paratext – served as an evaluation of student comprehension of the material as well as their ability to apply interpretive pressure based upon extratextual analysis.

For the purposes of the present study, I decided on the use of traditionally children's poetry and focused on the work of Lear and Carroll. While there are of course a wide variety of nonsense verse, children's stories, and other nonstandard readings, these authors provided a simple enough approach for basic comprehension while having a heft of subtext for further exploration of meaning. In conjunction with the analysis of meaning – or lack thereof – in these readings, the stylistics of Lear's and Carroll's writing provided the additional benefit of exposing students to otherwise unfamiliar and often untaught expressions, idioms, and dialect. This had the added benefit and difficulty of the prevalence of invented terms which the students needed to navigate in order to understand the narratives.

A major conceit of the present study was to analyze student awareness of vocabulary being used, whether they viewed the example terms as being common or invented. This survey was conducted for two classes – English Culture B and English Writing B – for ten vocabulary terms, equally mixed between common and invented “nonsense”. Both classes were of equivalent English ability, but only the English Culture class had studied poetry in English before. As an example of the terminology being used, students were asked to analyze the word “runcible” and whether it is definitely or probably common in English, or whether it is definitely or probably nonsense. Both classes were mostly able to correctly identify the term as being nonsense with English Culture reporting at over 77% definitely or probably nonsense and English Writing reporting at 88.9% definitely or probably nonsense (see Appendix B). I attribute most of these correct answers as a result of extensive lecturing on the term itself and how it has entered the modern lexicon as a “runcible spoon” meaning a “fork-like spoon”. It was clarified to students that, while it now exists in the lexicon in some limited capacity, it is still regarded as nonstandard.

There was some discrepancy, however, with other terms that had not been fully explored in lectures, particularly with the nonsense vocabulary as used in Carroll's "Jabberwocky". For instance, the term "galumph" from this poem caused a small amount of confusion. As the poem reads "He left it dead, and with its head / He went galumphing back" (Carroll 1871). The use of this term in this way – a load-bearing verb – seems to have tricked the majority of students involved into thinking it was a common standard term. Using the same ranking system in the questionnaire, English Culture reported at 66.6% probably/definitely common, while 27.8% believed it to be probably nonsense. Only one student (5.6%) from this group correctly identified the term to be definitely nonsense. English Writing reported at 33.3% probably common, while 66.7% identified the term as probably/definitely nonsense. The cause of the discrepancy between the classes is unclear, but likely due to differing engagement in the lectures.

Future Implementation

Regarding the use of "Jabberwocky" and the nonsense vocabulary used, it can be difficult to determine student reaction to the material as a whole when taking the famous author Lewis Carroll out of the conversation. When asked whether they were aware of the author, most students in the classes were. When clarified that he was the author of the *Alice in Wonderland* books, the remaining students recognized the title and later, by extension, the author. It is not out of the question, therefore, that such prior extratextual knowledge may have colored student reaction to the material being used. They were well aware of the nature of Carroll's writing through cultural information if nothing else.

Existing knowledge of the original authors seems to have some effect on student receptivity to the material upon later lecturing. Cui and Swider (2018) conducted similar studies on how students react to material based on what they do or do not learn about the authors ahead of time. In their article, they suggest that much of this appears to be based on how students identify with the authors or in how much they feel they can trust them as writers. The findings of their experiments in which only some students viewed biographical information prior to reading, indicate that "that the information about the author, which highlighted his/her achievements and reputation, may make the participants think that his/her poem has more underlying meanings" (p. 43). The effect of such a phenomenon on reading poems like "Jabberwocky", particularly given the widespread appeal of the *Alice in Wonderland* books, may indeed have some effect on how students view the material. With Carroll being as recognized as he is, it is conceivable that language learners who are exposed to his work would feel that any misunderstanding of the vocabulary contained in the writing is a fault of their own as opposed to the inherent nature of the Carroll's trickery with his nonsense verse.

Cui and Swider further commented on the amount of paratextual information provided to students, cautioning that instructors should practice moderation: "in literary education, paratexts should be carefully selected depending on specific teaching objectives" (45). This is particularly concerning as the poets chosen for the present study have a fair deal of literary historical fame, particularly in the case of Carroll. Cui and Swider continue to warn about how "prior knowledge or expectations also affect what and how much information is detected and processed" (45). Reflecting on the project's outcomes and student receptivity allows room to consider these warnings. The concern for instructors becomes how much of the information students are absorbing align with language learning and ability to identify sense from nonsense as well as how best to structure lessons around this kind of material to allow for development while exploring the themes of the chosen texts.

Reception

A few common issues arose from the student reflection survey conducted after our lectures (see Appendix B). While reception to the material varied from neutral to positive, student comments provided additional insights to their perception of the project, its applicability to their general studies, and suggestions for future implementation. The survey question “what changes do you think should be made in our approach to teaching/discussing these or other poems?” resulted in requests for further explanation of the source material, often commenting on the difficulty of the material. There were furthermore requests for additional time devoted to discussion and for general refinement of how the material is presented with one student clarifying the request, “How about incorporating a few explanations of grammar, idioms, and expressions using poetry? ... Since the teacher is a native English speaker (probably), explanations from a native English speaker's point of view is an advantage that Japanese teachers do not have.” The student’s comments here highlight one of the goals I had hoped to promote: increased interest in idioms, expressions, and nonstandard forms of speech.

Many students commented on the general usefulness of the cultural or perspective element: “I think it's important to think from a different perspective...” and “I think I learned about the creativity of poems and thought for poem changing”. These students, while still earnestly trying to understand the functionality of the target language, acknowledged the importance of the cultural aspects of our material. As they are from the English Culture B class at the university, perhaps this response may be expected.

Still, there were comments on the difficulty of the material being used or in how the lectures were structured. Students responding to the questionnaire with concerns about time limit: “Maybe we can be given a little more time to think about our answer to the question. 5 min for per question is a little short” and “Not all of the words [have the] same meaning and timing to use it. Sometimes we need to think about of why it was used it for purpose”. Others still expressed their frustrations with vocabulary or presentation of the material “I think we need to share roughly what words mean in order to discuss them” and “I thought [the teacher] should add more explanations about the word ‘no sense’” with one particular student being very direct with their request to “Refine your explanation to make it easier to understand”. Their frustrations and challenges are fair and have been noted for future implementation. I do, however, feel some encouragement from one student who appeared to understand the core of the project’s attempted goal: “If a word cannot be translated, think about what it means on your own.” While I wouldn’t quite have worded in this way the need to continue outside research and problem solving for comprehension purposes, the student’s acknowledgments are nevertheless welcome.

Conclusion

Concerns from the instructor end of this project largely revolve around student skill level and motivation, particularly as the material being used is quite complex for students who have not yet made substantial gains in the target language. While the theory was that exposure to nonsense verse and generally lighter themed children’s poetry would allow them to focus more on the themes of the readings without concerning themselves with constant vocabulary checking (either mentally or by using dictionaries and other tools), a solid basic foundation of language ability remains essential for engagement.

I have found upon reflection that a project-based end goal may be the most suitable application of the material. This may take the form of reading journals where students analyze a selection of the readings covered over the semester or a critical analysis in the form of an essay or presentation. It has been suggested before – in the vein of Hanauer – that a creative writing exercise based on this project may be beneficial in some way. Indeed, I have attempted this before to mixed effect. While creative writing has not been the primary focus of this particular study, it nevertheless holds a good deal of potential. As per the work of Garvin (2013): “As a second language teaching methodology, this type of creative writing establishes a unique space for personal and cultural identity negotiation as well as second language development” (p. 92). The crux of Garvin’s study was in actively writing in a poetic form to explore personal and national identity with the additional benefit of increased mastery of the target language. As for the applicability of this practice with nonsense verse, additional experimentation is needed.

Classes prior to the present study have lightly experimented with writing response poetry in a similar vein to the original. For example, among the post-reading questions included in our “Jabberwocky” reading packet, students were given the task to “Re-write the poem replacing the nonsense words with something that makes sense. Do you think your version carries the same weight as the original? Is it more clear or understandable?”. Unfortunately, students misunderstood the request to submit a re-worded version of the poem using legible, existing English vocabulary, instead latching on to the second part of the exercise providing what they believe would be the result of such an activity. One student, without providing the re-written poem as requested, answered the question on the perception of such an activity by saying “I consider it to carry no more weight than the original statement. But, I think it's understandable.” While this student and their peers misunderstood the intent of the exercise, they did in a roundabout way recognize what makes nonsense verse so valuable: its sheer audacious whimsy.

The primary goal of this project has been to allow students to explore topics outside of the more standardized, commercial textbooks. Through these readings and discussions, students have been exposed to a variety of vocabulary (invented or otherwise) that they would have otherwise likely never encountered through standard means. An additional benefit is in the opportunity for students to absorb cultural knowledge and other perspectives as they continue in their college careers and beyond. Using and experimenting with non-standard vocabulary remains invaluable from a humanities perspective. Regardless the importance of STEM-based learning and practices for technological and economic purposes, the importance of exploring the human spirit – particularly where things do not seem to make sense from any angle – is no trifling matter, indeed.

Appendix A

Pre and Post Reading Exercises for Lear and Carroll

Edward Lear

“How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear”

Pre-Reading Task: Vocabulary

You are going to read a poem from the British lyrical poet Edward Lear called “How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear”. Here are some words from the poem. What do the words mean?

Queer

Fastidious

Visage

Runcible

Pilgrimage

Pre-Reading Questions: Self-Descriptions

- How would you describe yourself?
- What is your greatest quirk? The weirdest thing about yourself?
- How would you feel if someone you just met told you all of their weirdest habits?
- Who is the strangest person you know? What makes them strange? How do you feel about that person?
- Would you rather be strange or normal? Why?

Post-Reading Questions

- How does the poem describe the poet?
- Do you like this poem? Why/why not?
- Why do you think Mr. Lear describes himself this way?
- Do you think this description gives you an effective understanding of the poet? Why/why not?
- At the end, the poem gets a little dark and gloomy as it speaks to the poet’s inevitable death. Why do you suppose that is?

Extra Task

- This poem is an absurd autobiography. What can we learn about the poet through this reading? Can we take any of it as truth?
- Lear suffered from occasional bouts of melancholy, but he wrote in comical absurdity. How do we reconcile the two? Are melancholy and humor related? Can you have one without the other?
- Do you think absurdity is an effective way of self-description? How would you describe yourself in an absurd manner?
- Have you ever met anyone who matches Lear’s description of himself (either physically or in personality)? In what ways are they similar? What do you think of this person?

Edward Lear

“The Owl and the Pussy Cat”

Pre-Reading Task: Vocabulary

You are going to read a children’s poem from the British lyrical poet Edward Lear called “The Owl and the Pussy Cat”. Here are some words from the poem. What do the words mean?

Elegant

Charming

Tarry

Dine

Mince

Pre-Reading Questions: Love & Marriage

- What are your thoughts on marriage? Why do people get married? Do you want to get married one day?
- What is the appropriate age to get married?
- How long should you date someone before deciding to get married?
- Why do people sometimes wait a long time (years) before getting married?
- What are the differences between western style weddings & Japanese weddings?
- What would make someone the perfect spouse for you? What qualities would they have?

Post-Reading Questions

- Do you like this poem? Why or why not?
- What do you think about the romance between the two animal characters? Is it identifiable? Unrealistic?
- Does this poem have a deeper underlying meaning? Or is it simply a straightforward children’s story?
- What kind of person do you think each animal represents?
- Children have enjoyed this story for nearly 150 years. Why do you think it’s so popular?

Extra Task

“The Owl and the Pussy Cat” does have an unfinished sequel. Portions of this sequel, “The Children of the Owl and the Pussy-cat” were published first after Lear’s death, in 1938. The children are part fowl and part cat, and love to eat mice.

The family live by places with strange names. The Cat dies, falling from a tall tree, making the Owl become a single parent. The death causes the Owl great sadness. The money is all spent, but the Owl still sings to the original guitar.

Because this sequel is unfinished, I’d like you to finish it. Write a sequel to “The Owl and the Pussy Cat” telling us what happens to the characters in the future (you don’t need to follow Lear’s original ideas). Do you think your version carries the same weight as the original? Is it more clear or understandable? How is it different? How is it the same?

Edward Lear
“The Jumblies”

Pre-Reading Task: Vocabulary

You are going to read a children’s poem from the British lyrical poet Edward Lear called “The Jumblies”. Here are some words from the poem. What do the words mean?

Sieve
Sail
Voyage
Crockery
Warble

Pre-Reading Questions: Adventure Time

- What kind of adventures have you been on? Tell me about your most interesting one.
- What is the farthest, most interesting place you want to go to?
- What is some of the best advice you have received?
- What advice have you ignored? How has it affected you?

Post-Reading Questions

- Who are the Jumblies? What do they represent?
- Why did the townspeople try to dissuade them from going?
- Why do you think they went anyway?
- Was it ultimately the right decision?
- What does this poem say about advice and stubbornness?
- What does it say about the spirit of adventure?

Extra Task

- Do you like the poem? Why/why not?
- What does this poem have to say about the human experience? Do you agree or disagree?
- Having read the poem, how do you feel about your own future travel plans/hopes?
- How does the poem’s nonsensical nature affect your reading of it?

Lewis Carroll
“Jabberwocky”

Pre-Reading Task: Vocabulary

You are going to read a poem from the British poet Lewis Carroll called “Jabberwocky”. Here are some words from the poem. What do the words mean?

Brillig
Mimsey
Frumious
Manxome
Gallumph

Pre-Reading Questions: Epic Nonsense

- What part of language is the most confusing to you? How do you react when encounter a new vocabulary word you don't know?
- Define "epic." What stories come to mind when you think of this term?
- What are your thoughts about fairy tales and children's stories? What are your favorites?
- Why are children fascinated with these stories?

Post-Reading Questions

- Do you like this poem? Why or why not?
- Why did Carroll write his poetry in nonsense verse? What effect does it have?
- What is the Jabberwocky? Why did the hero of the story need to slay it?
- What do you think some of the nonsense words mean?
- Why do you think this poem is so popular among readers (especially children)?
- Does this poem fit your image of an "epic" story?

Extra Task

Re-write the poem replacing the nonsense words with something that makes sense.

- Do you think your version carries the same weight as the original? Is it more clear or understandable?
- How is it different? How is it the same?

Appendix B

Nonsense Verse Questionnaire

Vocabulary

Responses:

- This is definitely common in English
- This is probably common in English
- This is probably nonsense
- This is definitely nonsense

Terms:

Runcible

Galumph

Mince

Tarry

Manxome

Warble

Pilgrimage

Frumious

Crockery

Mimsey

Challenges in Language Learning

Tell me briefly about any challenges you face when studying/using a second language.

Which of the nonsense poems did you understand well? (you may choose more than one)

Which of the nonsense poems did you enjoy the most? (you may choose more than one)

Which of the nonsense poems did you feel were most useful to your language studies? (you may choose more than one)

Comprehension & Interpretation

What is “How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear about? (choose the answer you believe to be most true)

- Mr. Lear is a friendly, charming gentleman
- Mr. Lear is an ugly, weird guy
- Mr. Lear is probably going to die soon
- Mr. Lear is everyone’s friend
- He is different from most people, and picky

What is “The Owl and the Pussy Cat” about? (choose the answer you believe to be most true)

- Society has forced the two characters to leave & find their own way
- Carpe Diem (seize the day). When you have the chance to build your life, you should take it
- Building connections & making friends (they meet the pig and turkey & have a party)
- It is a simple love story

What is “The Jumblies” about? (choose the answer you believe to be most true)

- Ignore the critics and do what your heart desires
- Man’s nature is to go on grand adventures to new lands

- Self-confidence and taking action will grant rewards
- Your success will make others envious and want to follow your example

What is “Jabberwocky” about? (choose the answer you believe to be most true)

- Nature is full of indescribable beasts & monsters
- The hero’s journey involves leaving home to face a challenge
- Those who take great risks are met with great rewards
- The actions of man are inconsequential (nature always returns to normal)

Student Feedback to the Text

Rank the statements on a scale from 1 – 5; 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree

Reading these poems was worthwhile as a student.

Reading these poems helped me to reflect on philosophical perspectives.

These poems are relevant to my life.

Discussing these poems was useful for practicing language skills.

Nonsense verse is valuable from an academic perspective.

Briefly explain your answer to the above question. What value do you think nonsense verse has?

What changes do you think should be made in our approach to teaching/discussing these or other poems?

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