

Concrete Poetry: Introducing an Unfamiliar Literary Genre into the L2 Classroom

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This paper presents a self-directed teacher development project (TDP) to introduce concrete poetry into an EFL classroom via a task-based language teaching approach, and reader response method. The participants in the study were first year Japanese students attending a university in Osaka, enrolled in an Introduction to Humanities course. The outcome showed that, initially, all participants had zero experience of studying poetry, that pre-method they were positive in attitude towards poetry, and by studying poetry they mostly perceived that their linguistic skills improved. Post-method analysis illustrated that for attitude and skill factors, a further increase in positivity was measured in both variables showing that the methodology was successful. Additionally, the participants rated the method highly and recommended no changes to be made. The TDP was deemed successful and further research is recommended with larger and more diverse samples.

Introduction

'You may get to the very top of the ladder, and find it is propped against the wrong wall' (Raine, 1915). With a similar sentiment, a significant degree of uncertainty is always present for educators when choosing future research projects, training, or further education courses. Self-directed teacher development projects (TDPs) are particularly challenging processes for teachers with factors to consider such as available time, costs, and access to technology and resources (Bonk & Lee, 2017). In addition to those factors, it is crucial to choose the correct 'wall' that not only provides success and enjoyment, but also support. In this article, the chosen 'wall' was the introduction of poetry into a Japanese EFL university class by designing an introductory methodology for poetry novices.

Why Poetry?

Poetry was chosen for three reasons. Firstly, as a catalyst for the basis of this study it was reported in the media that poetry has seen a global boom in the

last few years. According to a survey by the National Endowment for Arts in 2017, 28 million US adults read poetry that year with an increase of 5% from the previous study conducted in 2012 (Iyengar, 2018). The reader demographics illustrated that 18 – 24-year-olds doubled from 8.2% to 17.5% for the same period, and that female readers also increased from 8% to 14.5%. Increases were also shown for ethnic/racial subgroups and adults with a college education. Similarly, in the UK, poetry statistics reported by Nielsen BookScan showed that sales of poetry books were 12.3 million pounds showing an increase of 10.6% in 2017 (Ferguson, 2019). Consumer demographics revealed that 75% of sales were under 34 years of age and of that, 41% were aged 13-22. Teenage girls and women were the largest consumers of poetry approximately aligning with the NEA's findings in the US.

Secondly, the researcher read and wrote poetry for enjoyment and was interested to explore if that would translate as a learning objective into the EFL classroom by focusing on a 'reader response' approach and avoiding poetry stylistics. In addition to enjoyment, it was hoped that students would develop their critical thinking skills and enrich their vocabulary.

Thirdly, the researcher had no experience of teaching poetry in an EFL context, so as a TDP it presented unique and interesting challenges, such as considering which form of poetry to choose, developing a method to introduce it into the EFL classroom, and deciding how to measure the success of the TDP.

Reasons for the Poetry Boom

Andre Breedt, the M.D. of Nielsen BookScan, postulates that "in times of political upheaval and uncertainty, people turn to poems to make sense of the world" (Ferguson, 2019). Katy Shaw, a professor of contemporary writing at Northumbria University, also echoes this sentiment and stated in Ferguson's (2019) article that previous resurgences in poetry had been recorded during the rise of Chartism – a British working-class movement for parliamentary reform

(Britannica, n.d.) – in the 19th century, and in the 1980s miner's strike in the UK. Over the last few years, with the Trump administration in the US and Brexit in the UK there is definitely "uncertainty and upheaval". More recently, social media and its platforms are also offered as reasons. The brevity of certain forms of poetry lend to the usefulness of smartphones and the speed of which it can be shared. This has given rise to a genre of 'instapoets', much to the annoyance of the traditionalists (Ferguson, 2019).

Use of Literary Texts in EFL

The use of literary texts, such as poetry, in EFL is a divisive subject among educators. McKay (1982) states that the arguments against the use of such texts are that they reflect complex structures and a broad use of language, do not meet students' academic or occupational needs, and include cultural aspects that can be difficult for students to understand. However, supporters of literature use argue that by studying literary texts, students are enabled to process and interpret new language as it presents meaningful and memorable contexts from real life (Lazar, 2008).

Kodama (2012) researched articles from the *ELT Journal* over the period 1981-2010 and found 15 articles relating to how literature should be approached in communicative language teaching and summarized the findings into four main approaches:

1. Stylistics – focuses on a detailed analysis/critique of poetic devices (alliteration, metaphor, assonance etc.), semantics, discourse, lexis, and levels of language use including graphological and phonological items. This is viewed as the classical but long-winded approach to poetry analysis and requires students to have a good prior understanding of stylistics to be able to approach a text.
2. Language based teaching – this is a broad category of application and includes techniques such as reading aloud to develop confidence, pronunciation, and fluency skills. Lexical items can be focused on to encourage students to 'play' with language such as exploring rhymes and lyrics.

3. Reader response – focuses on the reader's personal interpretation of a text where there are no correct answers to be found. This approach requires zero knowledge of stylistics and multiple meanings can be explored by individuals in the class.
4. Young adult literature – use of this literary sub-genre allows L2 students to engage with vocabulary and language use that may be of a more appropriate level for them to comprehend, and therefore be able to find meaning more easily.

All approaches were analysed for positive and negative aspects and an integrated framework was put forward by Kodama (2012). However, in the context of this study the 'reader response' approach was of most interest as the reader is central to meaning construction and that different readers read ('respond') differently (Hall, 2005, p. 840). It could be argued that this is a shallow approach to poetry teaching/learning, and that the author's meaning or intent may be misinterpreted or changed which could be a personal issue for some educators. However, the primary advantage of this approach is that it is quick and easy to implement in the L2 classroom with no particular focus on stylistics or literary genre and it fits the context of this study.

Research

This research project was designed with a three-pronged approach and the outcomes are presented in this paper. Firstly, as a TDP, various sub-genres of poetry and examples were explored, and the following simple criteria were used to identify the best option for the participants:

1. Appropriate for the participants' linguistic abilities in the study
2. Ease of facilitating a reader response
3. Enjoyable to study and teach

Secondly, a methodology was developed for application in a live classroom. Lastly, student feedback was measured and analysed, both quantitatively and qualitatively, pre- and post-method by questionnaire instruments. Researcher observations and student feedback results would

provide a measure to decide if the TDP was successful or not. The following sections outline the form of poetry chosen, the approach and methodology, the results and discussion, and lastly, future recommendations.

Choice of Poetry Genre

There are many different genres of poetry to choose but one type stood out as most suitable for the participants in the study, and that was 'concrete poetry'. According to Poets.org (2004), the term 'concrete poetry' was first coined in the early 1950's by European artists Max Bill and Öyving Fahlström. The poems were constructed in an intangible and unidentifiable structure which would give no suggestion to the meaning or context behind the poem. However, as the popularity of concrete poetry grew and spread, by the 1960's abstraction was less of a focus, and it became more akin to a fusion of word and visual art utilizing not only paper as a medium, but also photography, film and soundscapes. As a result, nowadays, we can find a highly structured form of poetry fused with visual imagery.

In Appendix A, an example of concrete poetry can be found entitled 'Kitty' (Hollander, 1993). There are obvious features that the reader can immediately observe by skimming the poem. The cat shape might lead to speculation and allude to the poem being about a cat, possibly the personality or character traits of a cat. There is no punctuation except for the use of capitalization of certain letters to denote a new sentence. The choice of the word 'tale' at the end of the cat's 'tail' is interesting with the double meaning.

The virtue of this type of poetry is that the imagery used supersedes the need for the reader to focus on the density or length of the text. This could be particularly useful for L2 learners and diffuse a potential feeling of poetry being too difficult or challenging to understand. This was the primary criterion of choice.

Research Questions for the Participants in the Study

RQ1. Pre-methodology: What are the participants' experiences of, and attitude towards, studying poetry to improve their English skills?

RQ2. Post-methodology: Did the participants' perception towards poetry change either positively

or negatively compared to RQ1 findings, and how did they feel about the methodology presented?

Research Questions for the Researcher in the Study

RQ3. Does the proposed method serve as an appropriate introduction for both teacher and student poetry novices?

RQ4. Was the TDP exercise successful?

Approach and Methodology

The study was designed with a focus on student-centeredness, and a task-based language teaching (TBLT) structure. The task-based structure followed the traditional pre-, while- and post-task construct for both teacher and student tasks (Willis & Willis, 2007).

Participants

The participants were first year female Japanese students (n=20) attending a university in Osaka, enrolled in an Introduction to Humanities course. The participants were an average age of 18, had a mean average of 8.9 years total English experience and were focusing primarily on reading skills and vocabulary acquisition. The semester was 15 weeks (30 x 90-minute classes) and the course included literary texts, interviews, speeches, and biographies.

Instruments

Instrument 1 (Appendix B) collected participants' data pre-intervention on their:

- a. Experience of using poetry to study English
- b. Attitude towards poetry as a literary genre
- c. Perception of how studying poetry improves English skills

Questions 5 and 8, '*I think studying poetry is useful*' and '*I really dislike poetry*', required a written response to qualify the participants' choices while other general comments could also be added. There were two multi-item scales represented in the instrument: Attitude and Skills.

Instrument 2 (Appendix C) collected participants' data post-intervention on their:

- a. Attitude towards poetry as a literary genre

- b. Perception of how studying poetry improves English skills
- c. Perception of the methodology used to study poetry

Four questions were added to collect more detailed information about any change in opinion towards poetry, suggested changes to the methodology, feelings about creating poetry and other comments. There were three multi-item scales represented in the instrument: Attitude, Skills and Method. Both instruments utilized a 5-point Likert scale with a value of 1 equating to strongly agree, a value of 3 equating to neither and a value of 5 equating to strongly disagree.

Administration of the Instruments

To reduce bias or influence, both instruments were given in an envelope, to a volunteer student. The teacher left the classroom while the instruments were completed to assure that students' anonymity was protected. The volunteer then collected the instruments and placed them in a sealed envelope.

Data Treatment

Instrument 1 and 2 data were inputted into SPSS 26. The multi-item scales were tested for internal consistency by evaluating the Cronbach Alpha values (Instrument 1 – Attitude = 0.78 and Skills = 0.81; Instrument 2 - Attitude = 0.79, Skills = 0.79 and Method = 0.85) and reduced to a single variable for statistical analysis. According to Bryan and Cramer (2005), 0.80 is the value which indicates a satisfactory level of conceptual relatedness between items. Deleting items from scales less than 0.80 did not improve the values significantly and were therefore left intact.

The open questions were analysed and mined for supporting information to corroborate the statistical findings and allow for further comments on the process.

Materials

The poem used for the 'while-task' and the introduction of the method was 'Kitty' (Hollander, 1993) - Appendix A. The additional concrete poems used in the student post-task have not been included.

Procedures

The following sections contain a summary of the task-based structure for both teacher and student participants.

For the Teacher

Pre-task - Administer Instrument 1 and analyse the collected data.

While-task - Deliver the method for studying concrete poetry and highlight any salient points or features to the students' after the task is completed.

Post-Task – Administer Instrument 2 after the students complete their post-task, analyse the collected data and compare it to instrument 1.

For the Students

Pre-Task – Research concrete poetry for homework and complete a 5W1H (What, Where, When, Who, Why and How?) analysis to prepare for the next class. In class, they discuss and share their research before moving onto the while-task.

While-Task - Students work through the method (outlined below), following the instructions, for studying concrete poetry under the guidance and facilitation of the teacher.

Post-Task – Students prepare a group presentation where: a) the group introduces the analyses of a single concrete poem together, and b) each individual group member introduces a concrete poem they have created.

The following explanation details the while-task and post-task procedures for the students and teacher following on from the pre-task discussion and comparison of the participants' research into concrete poetry.

Student While-Task Procedure (Method)

1. Hand out the 'Kitty' poem (Appendix A) to the students in small groups.

Guide the students to:

4. Guess what they think the poem will be about.
5. Decide how to best read the poem – left, right, up, down, etc.
6. Look for punctuation or grammar mistakes/differences.
7. Find rhyming words.
8. Read the poem as a group and underline all the words they know.

7. Once again discuss what they think the poem is about.
8. Check any unfamiliar words in the dictionary and read again. Has the meaning changed?
9. Explain the poem to another group. Do they agree on the meaning? Why or why not?

Student Post-Task Procedure

1. Give the students a different concrete poem to study in small groups.
2. Have them follow the method above to analyse the poem together (Create a handout).
3. Ask them to create a presentation to introduce their group analyses of the poem.
4. Ask them to each create their own concrete poem and present it to the class.

Commentary on the method

The method was designed as a 'reader-response' and avoids focusing on specific poetry stylistics. The justification for the lighter approach is that it is presented as a method for introducing poetry to L2 learners. Personal meaning is the driving force and there is a focus on how to read the poem rather than what to read. There is also a strong emphasis on getting the students to focus on what they *know* rather than what they do *not know*.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In response to RQ1, all participants, with an average of 8.9 years of English study, had zero experience of studying or using poetry. This was astonishing and led the researcher to initially postulate that there may be resistance to studying poetry, and a perception that the class could be too difficult, a commonly held preconception. However, analysis revealed that the participants evaluated both Attitude (M = 2.67, SD = .39) and Skills (M = 2.38, SD = .39) quite positively (1 = strongly agree, 3 = neither and 5 = strongly disagree). The participants fell between the 'agree' and 'neither' values, with a tendency towards the 'neither' for Attitude, and closer to 'agree' for Skills. The open question items were analysed and yielded mostly positive adjectives such as: *enjoyable, interesting, useful, important, and creative*. However, two participants were quite negative towards poetry and deemed it *too difficult, useless, and not useful in daily life*.

Regarding RQ2, analysis of instrument 2 (Appendix C) results revealed that the students' perception towards studying poetry and the linguistic skills benefit were positive for Attitude (M = 1.69, SD = .51) and Skills (M = 1.55, SD = .47) where both variables fell between 'strongly agree' and 'agree', moving away from the ambiguous 'neither' on the scale. Researcher observations during application of the method corroborated these results as the participants appeared to enjoy, and were engaged with, the entire process. It was interesting to observe the participants move from an initial point of fear and trepidation at the subject matter to pure enjoyment and growing confidence. Qualitative analysis yielded adjectives such as: *enjoyable, interesting, useful, easier, improved, fun and love*. Zero negative vocabulary was found, and this suggested that the two participants who thought poetry to be previously *useless* converted their opinions post-method. No specific comments could be clearly identified due to anonymity.

All participants evaluated the Method (M = 1.69, SD = .39) positively and described the methodology as: *easy to follow, step by step, increasing their understanding and critical thinking, and that they would recommend it to others*. Total feedback indicated that no amendments to the methodology were recommended.

In addressing RQ3, The process for the small group of participants was seamless and this was based on the feedback, instrument results and researcher observations. Additionally, the participants indicated that they not only '*enjoyed creating the poetry*' but they '*really enjoyed listening to each other's poetry*' and '*seeing the creativity of other individuals*'. They were '*inspired*' and also '*sad*' as some indicated that this would be the only time that they would take part in a class like this and would probably never study poetry again.

Finally, looking at RQ4, from the researcher's perspective it was extremely successful. Participant feedback aside, the process of choosing a literary genre unknown to the researcher and designing a method to introduce that into the classroom was deeply rewarding and challenging. It was an inspiring process echoing participants' comments.

Teacher Recommendations

The wording of the student and teacher tasks was a challenge to make them brief but

understandable. They were extensively tested by peers and re-worded where needed, however it is not inconceivable that a reader might find them confusing in places to follow. As this is a TDP, and there are tasks outlined for both teacher and students, a misunderstanding or overlap could occur. Therefore, it would be advisable to focus on either the student or teacher part only and understand clearly what must be done before moving onto reading the next task stage. Teachers that are new to TBLT or those who use it infrequently may find it useful to understand or refresh how TBLT is structured before applying the method.

Limitations and Implications

Given the small sample size and the particular group studied, it is impossible to make assertions about introducing poetry on a wider scale. Going beyond mere descriptive statistics would be required, no matter how positive the outcome was for this context. However, this study was primarily a TDP and, as such, an overwhelmingly positive one for the researcher, but the outcomes of the process did reveal that this study could and should be replicated on a bigger scale. It would be prudent to select samples from different year groups and mixed-sex classes. Inferential statistics could be performed, and comparisons made for a wider population. Additionally, upon reflection the instruments could be improved upon by reviewing the item wording and additional pilot testing to increase the internal reliability for a larger scale study.

Conclusion

Poetry is booming globally but not yet in the TEFL world. This small study has taken steps towards illustrating that as a literary genre it is worthy of further exploration and inclusion in the Japanese EFL classroom. One of the main purposes for reading poetry, and as a learning objective in this study, is for enjoyment, and this word was mentioned repeatedly in the instrument feedback and in the classroom by the students. It is the first word that springs to mind when describing the TDP process from beginning to end. As researchers and educators, we should strive for enjoyment in our endeavours, classrooms, and workplaces, but it is also paramount to make sure we choose the correct wall upon which to lean our ladders.

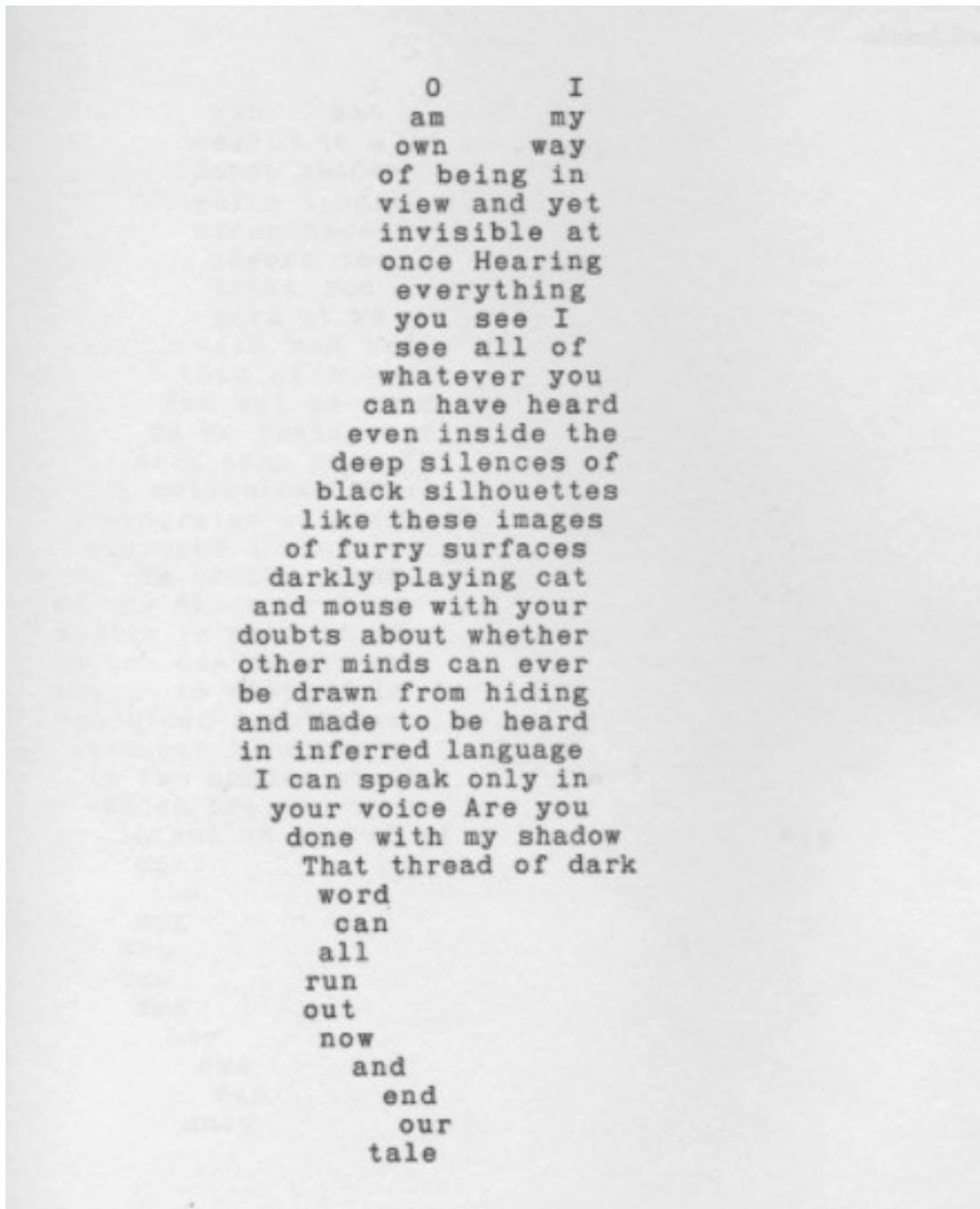
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Appendix A



Appendix B

Please read the following statements and choose the best answer for you. Mark a circle 'O' in each box.

	Yes	No			
1. I have used poetry before to study English.					
	Str on gly Ag ree	Ag ree	Nei the r	Dis agr ee	Str on gly Dis agr ee
2. I think studying poetry can be enjoyable.					
3. I think studying poetry can be interesting.					
4. I don't think studying poetry can be too difficult.					
5. I think studying poetry can be useful.					
6. I think it is important to study literary texts like poetry.					
7. I don't think studying poetry is important for creativity.					
8. I really dislike poetry.					
9. I don't think studying poetry will improve my vocabulary.					
10. I think studying poetry will improve my reading skills.					
11. I don't think studying poetry will improve my listening skills.					
12. I think studying poetry will improve my thinking skills.					
13. I think studying poetry will improve my speaking skills.					
14. I think studying poetry will improve my communication skills.					
15. I don't think studying poetry will improve my writing skills.					
16. I think studying poetry will improve my creativity.					
<p>Comment Section - Please write a comment explaining:</p> <p>Question 5's answer:</p> <p>Question 8's answer:</p> <p>Other comments:</p> <p>Thank you for participating in the study. if you have any questions or would like a copy of the final results/paper please do not hesitate to ask or contact: pryce.j.73@gmail.com</p>					

Appendix C

Please read the following statements and choose the best answer for you. *Mark a circle 'O' in each box.*

	Str on gly Ag ree	Ag ree	Nei the r	Dis agr ee	Str on gly Dis agr ee
1. Studying concrete poetry was enjoyable.					
2. Studying concrete poetry was interesting.					
3. Studying concrete poetry useful for improving my English.					
4. Studying concrete poetry was easier than I thought it would be.					
5. Studying concrete poetry helped improve my creativity.					
6. It was fun to create my own concrete poetry.					
7. I would like to study poetry again to improve my English.					
8. It was interesting to create my own concrete poem.					
9. I think studying concrete poetry improved my vocabulary.					
10. I think studying concrete poetry improved my reading skills.					
11. I think studying concrete poetry improved my listening skills.					
12. I think studying concrete poetry improved my thinking skills.					
13. I think studying poetry will improve my discussion skills.					
14. I think studying concrete poetry improved my overall communication skills.					
15. I think studying concrete poetry improved my writing skills.					
16. I think studying concrete poetry improved my creativity.					
17. The method to study concrete poetry was easy to follow.					

18. The method to study concrete poetry helped me understand the poem better.					
19. The method to study concrete poetry helped me think more deeply about the poem.					
20. I would recommend this method to other students if they asked.					
21. I would use this method for other texts if I had the chance.					
22. The concrete poems you studied in class were interesting.					
23. I think studying concrete poetry is a good way to introduce poetry into the class.					
24. The presentation task was a good way to practice studying the method for analysing poetry.					

Please Answer the Following questions:

1. After studying concrete poetry has your opinion of studying poetry changed? Why or why not?

2. Would you change anything about the method to study concrete poetry? Why or why not?

3. How did you feel about creating your own poetry?

4. Do you have any other comments?

Thank you for participating in the study. if you have any questions or would like a copy of the final results/paper please do not hesitate to ask or contact: pryce.j.73@gmail.com