

## Using Limericks in English Language Teaching

One method for improving the success of a language teaching endeavor is to use materials that engage the students. If students are interested in the teaching material, there is a higher likelihood that they will become proficient practitioners of the language. I kept this observation in mind when creating the sample teaching material for this assignment. I used limericks as the theme for the material because I feel that the humorous, often silly content, and the distinctive meter may help capture the interest of teachers and students alike. However, these qualities are not the only ones that have influenced my decision to use limericks. While it may be useful if users enjoy using the materials, the main goal is to teach language, and so, I needed to test the potential of limericks for teaching English.

To reinforce my initial suspicion that limericks have great language teaching potential, I performed a Google search on the use of limericks in ESL instruction<sup>1</sup> and found several resources that have successfully employed them. I used ideas and techniques from some of these sources to create the materials for this assignment. The resulting tutorial addresses several categories from the diagram of the needs of the language user described in Figure 2 on pg. 42 of Cook. Furthermore, it attempts to address the problems which result from teaching language in discrete units (Cook pgs. 42-43) by having the users analyze both the grammatical structure and the meaning of the source material which requires comprehension in addition to a knowledge of the formal language system. I will explain how this is accomplished in the detailed analysis of each activity section later in the paper. Before doing that, I will give a short description of the overall visual and and logical layout.

The document is 2 pages long and is divided into 4 sections. Each section builds on the information learned in the previous one. Cook would note that all the sections have a common schema (Cook pg. 70). There is some informational content in each one, which the student

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=ESL+limerick&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

must read or hear, followed by an activity section. Each such section contains tasks or questions referring to the preceding material. Each activity section is clearly marked by a boldface heading. The first two sections require that a proficient speaker read the limericks aloud, and this requirement is indicated above the poems. There is some further explanatory material below each of the limericks in the first three sections. Additionally, Sections 3 and 4 have headings that describe their purpose. The activities don't strictly require instructor participation, though students may need some assistance understanding the example of meter in section 3. After section 4, the final part gives some additional resources for any student who may have warmed to the charm of the quirky limerick. I kept the visual design as simple as possible to minimize any distraction from the material. The section titles and activity labels use larger typefaces so students don't have to hunt for them on the page. Each task or question in the "Activity" section is a separate bullet point. I tried to tailor the visuals toward maximizing the overall ease of use.

I will now discuss the source material and the activities for each section starting with section 1. The first limerick is read aloud by the instructor for a listening exercise. I assumed that the instructor is familiar with limericks and knows where to place stress since the exercise depends on a proper reading of the source material. The short passage below the poem identifies it as a limerick and gives a brief description of the rhyme scheme of limericks. The use of the term "beat" is somewhat of a compromise. It doesn't fully describe the concept of meter, but I felt that introducing the concept of the meter of verse was not appropriate at that stage. I chose to use "beat" because it is a term that non-native speakers may be familiar with through exposure to music. The first of the two activities requires the student to identify rhyming words. After listening to the teacher's reading, students will start noticing the rhyme. The text immediately above the activity section provides the answer to the first activity question, but by underlining the appropriate word in each line, the students look over the limerick again and may realize that the rhyming words are phonetically similar. This can help them pronounce words since students can use the sounds of familiar words as hints when pronouncing unfamiliar words. While this technique may occasionally fail, pointing out a general trend may make the language learner's job somewhat easier. The second question checks if the student has noticed stress placement in the limerick. It can be answered by a simple yes/no response, and later questions require the student to be aware of the

beat. Overall, the first activity section contains easy exercises so the student is not intimidated at the beginning of the lesson.

The start of section 2 involves the student, by asking her to join the teacher in reading aloud. By reading with the instructor, students can improve their awareness of both the rhyme and the meter of limericks. While normal speech does not rhyme, stressed words are very common. Word stress can have significant semantic relevance and learning to hear stress may improve students' understanding of the spoken English. The first activity in the section repeats the listening exercise and provides students with ways to indicate where they hear stress (by clapping or snapping their fingers). It is an exercise that requires a speaker and a listener. The speaker needs to pronounce clearly and be aware of the meter of the limerick. The listener in turn is required to concentrate on the speaker's voice and follow her closely in order to note word stressing at the correct point in the limerick. The first 2 sections deal with the pronunciation part of the language system as noted by Cook on pg. 42. However, the concept of beat, which is getting the learner to notice stress in this case, is not explicitly defined in this diagram. I describe word or syllable stressing as a paralinguistic feature since stress placement is not restricted to pronunciation. A word in two different sentences may have the same basic pronunciation, it may even have the same syntactic position, but its meaning in a sentence can change through stress placement. In the first activity, students are asked to indicate the "beat" of the limerick by underlining the words where they notice it. They are being asked to mark the stressed words. The use of the term "beat" is once again clumsy, but it is somewhat appropriate. Since the material is a rhyming poem, and the listener hears it being read aloud, the lengthened pronunciation of stressed words and sound out an overall beat in the limerick.

After hearing the first two limericks, and completing the activities students have developed some familiarity with the meter and the rhyme scheme. They may also have noticed the semantic structure of a limerick. The third and fourth tasks in the second Activity section work best if done in groups. Students need to pay attention to the structure and the semantic content of limericks. The third exercise involves arranging the lines of a limerick in correct order. Because the scrambled verse is low in the page, students can easily refer to the two other examples above it for help with completing the exercise. They can refer to the notes on the rhyme scheme to start on the problem. The problem is simplified because students know that the lines in the triplet will be numbered 1,2 and 5 and the couplet will be numbered 3 and 4, but the rhyme scheme alone doesn't provide enough information to

arrange the lines correctly. All three limericks share what Cook would call a common semantic schema. Once students notice the schema, they can arrange the lines in correct order. The final question is aimed at making students aware of what was involved in correctly arranging the lines of the limerick in the previous task.

The second page introduces students to limerick writing. The “Writing limericks” section describes one possible stressing scheme. I used the term “rhythm” in the text because it is a musical term and is appropriate when referring to the distinct tune of a limerick. The boldfaced words mark stress. Similar to the note about rhyming on the previous page, there is a note that points out the similarities in the sounds of lines 1,2 and 5 and lines 3 and 4. The first question in the section asks students to write in the last words of 3 lines in a given limerick. Students can draw upon their knowledge of vocabulary and relationships between entities (e.g. hands and feet; sticks and stones) to complete the line and the pronunciation of candidate words to select an appropriate answer for each missing piece. The relationship between the missing words and the sentences to which they are eventually added is well described by Fillmore’s concept of semantic frames<sup>2</sup>. Awareness of phonetic similarities and an understanding of the semantic environments in which words occur are both required to successfully answer the question. The following question asks students to describe the meaning of the limerick and to explain the story it tells. I included this question because the text at the top of the page points out that every limerick tells a story<sup>3</sup>. It requires the student to consider the entire passage instead of explaining the meaning of individual lines. If a student has difficulty explaining the meaning, one possible reason is that he did not use appropriate words to complete the limerick.

The fourth and final section, provides two starting lines. Many limericks begin with similar lines. The first activity requires students to construct a limerick using the foundation provided by one of these opening lines. The lines are provided so that students don’t feel intimidated when writing what may be their first limerick. It also provides them with two themes that are common in limericks. In contrast, the last activity challenges the students and requires them to step off the beaten path of limerick subject matter. They can construct their poems based on their knowledge of other constraints of the genre

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<sup>2</sup><http://framenet.icsi.berkeley.edu> I have used the url as a reference because I did not know which paper to use to refer to the concept of semantic frames

<sup>3</sup>Apart from a few completely nonsensical ones, but those are rare.

such as: the number of lines; stress placement; the rhyme scheme; and the meter.

The last item on the second page provides the student with additional resources on limericks. The purpose of this section is not pedagogical but informational. Since limericks are entertaining and amusing poems, students who find them interesting can use these resources to find large collections of limericks and other people who share their newfound interest. They can improve their language skills through further reading and can greatly benefit from interaction with the people they may meet online or as William Gibson puts it in “meatspace”<sup>4</sup> (in person). I enjoy reading and hearing limericks and like to come up with some of my own. Hoping to increase the ranks of limerick enthusiasts, I attempted to build language teaching materials around them. I hope you enjoyed reviewing these materials.

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<sup>4</sup>A quote from *Neuromancer* by William Gibson, one of the earliest cyberpunk novels.