

## Conference Paper

# Poetry Writing in EFL Classrooms: Learning from Indonesian Students' Strategies

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**ORCID:**Rahmah Fithriani: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1876-8037>**Abstract**

Hanauer's *Meaningful Literacy* has been used as a major justification for including poetry writing as part of pedagogical practices in second and foreign language contexts. Unfortunately, within the EFL context, many teachers are still reluctant to include poetry writing in their teaching practices due to the common assumption that writing poems in a second language is too difficult for students to deal with and therefore will be out of their reach and interest. This qualitative study, which collected data through observations, documentation and surveys, investigated how 171 Indonesian EFL students successfully write their poetry books in creative writing classes. Employing an ethnographic case study approach, the findings showed that students use the following strategies in writing their English poems: (1) Using popular poem templates as idea starters; (2) Creating a vocabulary bank for writing rhyming poems; and (3) Building emotions through personal story sharing and later channeling them through poetry writing. This study concludes that EFL students could enjoy poetry writing as expressive pedagogy and thus, debunks the negative assumption related to EFL students' lack of interest and appreciation in poetry writing.

**Keywords:** Creative writing, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), expressive pedagogy, poetry writing, Indonesian students

## 1. Introduction

For most language teachers, teaching writing skills in second language classrooms has always been perceived to be very challenging. This perception is likely shaped because writing requires communicative goals as the final achievement by involving problem solving as the dissemination strategies (Fithriani, 2017; Graham, 2010; Kurt & Atay, 2007). In line with the teachers' perception, most language learners find writing skill difficult to master in comparison with three other language skills namely reading, listening, and speaking. For second language (L2) learners, learning to write has multiple difficulties where they not only have to translate their ideas into the target language but also to transfer and to organize them into written language that employ different rhetoric patterns used in their first language (L1) (Fithriani, 2018).

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In addition to the aforementioned reasons, Hanauer (2012) opined that writing is difficult for L2 learners because there are contractual agreements in which they are directed to write based on the imposition of abstract standards or specific textbooks to then be evaluated based on external standardized tests. L2 writing classes, particularly those in English as a foreign language (EFL) context, have been widely criticized as being “dehumanized” (Hanauer, 2012: 105) and “decontextualized” (Widdowson 1998: 712), which are heavily loaded with linguistic, structural and cognitive terms without any concrete activities for learners that are personally contextualized. With this pedagogical system, learners are seen merely as “an intellectual entity involved in an assessable cognitive process” (Hanauaer, 2012: 105). Ideally, L2 learners as student writers need to be given opportunity to write based on their expressive needs which allow the authentic, meaningful, personal expression to be at the center of literacy instruction. This approach is termed by Hanauer (2012) as meaningful literacy in which instead of setting a pedagogical approach that is overwhelming the language learners with structural, linguistic and cognitive terms, meaningful literacy offers an emotional and embodied experience in addition to being a cognitive process.

Poetry writing is one of the most efficient pedagogical approaches to meaningful literacy (Chamcharatsri, 2013; Hanauer, 2012; Iida, 2012). Research has shown that incorporating poetry into writing instruction provides multifaceted benefits. Hughes (2007) claimed that writing poetry helps build on the awareness of students and allows for a connection to oneself, others, and the world. In addition, it facilitates emotional speech, facilitates higher-order thought capacity, and improves ways of learning. Sinclair, Jeanneret, and O’Toole (2009) stated that personal expression through poetry writing helps students through different media to gain an awareness of and share information about ideas and emotions, as well as create new understandings of language and its emotionality. Similar to this, Hansen (2011) and Brian (2008) argued that the language of poetry plays a role in the emotional development of students since it allows them to experience real life connections and participate in deep thinking.

With all the potential advantages of integrating using poetry in language classes as highlighted by many L2 researchers and practitioners, poetry writing has also been introduced in some EFL contexts with different levels of acceptance. However, in general, many English teachers are still reluctant to include it in their teaching practices with the assumption that the teaching of poetry to EFL students has always been a very demanding task (Khatib, 2011). Furthermore, they believe that English poetry is too difficult for EFL learners to deal with and therefore will be out of their reach and interest (Hanauer, 2012). They are also intimidated to writing and analyzing English

poems because they think that they do not know how to write it or the author is surely concealing some meaning in the text that they just can't find (McGee, 2001). Within Indonesian EFL context, integrating poetry in English writing classes is even more challenging since the curriculum guiding the objectives, contents, materials and methods used to carry out English teaching and learning process in this country is designed, developed, and mandated by the government (Fithriani, 2020). As what Widodo, Budi, and Wijayanti (2016) claimed that English teachers in Indonesia are curriculum implementers where teachers merely teach from restricted curriculum standards as set out in national curriculum guidelines that are not focused on the learning needs of individual students. This is to say that it is unlikely that English teachers in Indonesia would incorporate poetry writing in their teaching practices for two reasons; first, the perceived difficulty and second, its exclusion from national curriculum.

Indonesian EFL teachers' reluctance towards the integration of poetry in English writing class has inspired me to include writing poems as parts of my teaching practice in some creative writing classes that I facilitate since 2017. This relatively short experience in teaching poetry writing to Indonesian college students could be said successful, which brought me to the conclusion that Indonesian teachers as well as students' negative perceptions towards poetry writing could be altered when they know how to make it useful not only in improving learners' English language skills but also providing a meaningful and fruitful language learning experience. Therefore, this study aims to find out students' perception of poetry writing and to investigate their strategies in successfully completing the poetry book project as part of class requirements in a Creative Writing class. Specifically, there are two research questions posed in this study:

1. Do the students find poetry writing interesting to learn?
2. What strategies did the students use to successfully complete their poetry book project?

Thus, the focus of this study is not to investigating the degree of the effect statistically, but more on recording students' opinion and experiences and describing them comprehensively. The findings of this research will be beneficial for English teachers to have alternative strategies in teaching poetry writing for EFL learners. Furthermore, EFL learners might see writing particularly poetry writing is not difficult but interesting.

## 2. Literature Review

## 2.1. Creative Writing as Part of Meaningful Literacy

Meaningful literacy is a literacy instruction conceptualized by Hanauer (2012) for second/foreign language (SFL) learners to learn English in humanizing way. He believes that the purpose of language learning is facilitating personally meaningful expression. He simply argues that “learning a language is significant, potentially life-changing, event” (p. 1). Nevertheless, studying language is completely different for those who did not know the language in the first place. In their classroom, language teachers would be simple to say foreign-language things so they will speak to them instead of saying something. SFL students are then advised to learn English through the text in this literacy instruction, by voicing what they want to say in the target language.

Hanauer (2012) formulates a set of principles guiding SFL writing instruction by using the core of the learning experience, namely the individual learner, personal experience, history and social contextualization. These four concepts include 1) Autographical writing aimed to analyze and understand oneself using memory, imagination and personal experience; 2) Emotional writing facilitating a method of student writing that stimulates and elicits the writer and the reader’s emotional responses and endorses the expression of personal feelings; 3) Personal insight providing a reflective mechanism that contributes to a deeper understanding and appreciation of personal experience; and 4) Authentic public access situating writing in a social process of expressing personal views, understandings and emotions to others who are important for the writer either inside or outside classrooms. He believes that writing instruction designed on these principles will make the learner as the context of his or her own language use and learning. In addition, it will direct the process of written language directed by the expressive needs of the writer. One of the writing instructions that designed by using these principles is creative writing.

Widodo, Budi, and Wijayanti (2016) define creative writing as a self-expressive and creative way for SFL learners convey multi-semiotic meanings. It is also a way for learners to use their rich backgrounds and experiences to the classroom into writing form (Chamcharatsri, Garcia, Romero, Mohamad, 2017). Creative writing also allows SFL learners to openly express their ideas without having to think about grammatical rules, and thus helps to make their writing fluent (Hanauer, 2012). In addition to fluency, this genre of writing is also claimed to help promote language development at the level of grammar, vocabulary and discourse; encourage learners’ creativity in using the language; and trains the right side of the brain, which focuses on feelings, physical

sensations, and the like (Kırkgöz, 2014). One model in creative writing in which these reasons are manifested is poetry writing.

## 2.2. Poetry Writing in EFL Context

A poetry is a piece of writing in which words are arranged beautifully and rhythmically (Mittal, 2014). In particular, Hanauer (2004) described poetry as a literature text which presents the writer's experiences, thoughts and feelings through a self-referential use of language that generates a new understanding of the text for the reader and writer. Simply defined, poetry is a creative literacy writing that arranged beautifully and rhythmically to express experiences, thought and feelings.

Writing poetry itself is a creative and reflective writing approach (Celly, 2019). When incorporating in language classrooms, poems could offer opportunities for students to project their feelings and emotions, thus fostering personal involvement in learners since it deals with universal themes and human concerns (Heath, 1996). For L2 learners, writing poetry may motivate them not only emotionally but also cognitively to communicate their feelings/emotions and ideas (Widodo, et.al 2016) and to reflect on their personal life-experiences and negotiate how to construct and express their voices in the target language (Iida, 2016). Furthermore, Hughes (2007) claimed that poetry writing helps promote students' critical thinking when they read a poem and try to understand not only the meaning but also the reason why the author wrote it.

In EFL context, integrating poetry writing in pedagogical practice is believed beneficial for the learners (Hanauer, 2001). Some other reasons to include poetry in EFL teaching and learning include its use as a source of content-rich reading material, a model of creative language in use, a way to introduce vocabulary in context, and a way to focus students' attention on English pronunciation, rhythm and stress (Kellem, 2009). In addition, Mittal (2014) argues it is because poetry helps learners to Figure of Speech, Adjectives, Phrases and symbolic words spontaneously to show feelings. When we read, listen or write something aloud and rhythmically we will also easily learn it.

In regard to its benefits, it is necessary for EFL teachers to understand the strategies to teach English through poetry writing. Schroeder (2010) suggested the first strategy that needs to be implemented in teaching poetry writing, namely the use of template in order to brainstorm the students' idea. Meanwhile, Hanauer (2012) used writing instruction that situated within a process of personal exploration of memory and the expression of personal understanding and insight to other class members and significant people (beyond the classroom) within the students' life. Basically, he distinguishes the course

into three important stages of the educational process. Firstly, he spends time *generating personal motivation for self-exploration*. Secondly, he initiates *a process of autobiographical exploration*. Finally, he brings the process of *poetic expression of autobiographical memory*.

Kellem (2009) offered Formeaning Response approach to be implemented in EFL classroom. This approach is a combination between Stylistic and Reader-Response approaches. In this approach, students will experience some activities in the classroom. Firstly, the students will have a warm-up activity in which they will be introduced to the background of knowledge of understanding a poem such as by discussing about picture or answer an interview questions about personal experiences. Secondly, the students will have form and meaning activities in which they will look at the poem by alternative word exercise, listening cloze and listing some words in poems. Thirdly, response activities in which the students will read the poem entirely and try to discover and express what the poem means to them as individuals. Lastly, the students will have Formeaning Response activities in which they will discuss the alternative words exercise that had been written in the form and meaning activities and then they will have true/false activities in which the teacher will develop statements that might be related to the language of poem or associated to the main theme of the poem. Finally, the student will mark the statements by using True or False. The result of this strategy makes the students will attend to the language of a poem, use that linguistic evidence to discuss the poem and relate the themes to their own ideas and lives.

Iida (2016) conducted a research in Japanese EFL students and found that multiwriting *Haiku* (Japanese poetry) pedagogy can enable L2 learners to explore and better understand themselves and make their language learning more personal, humanistic and meaningful. The steps that the students must to do are: understanding the concept of haiku, reading haiku in English as a foreign language, composing haiku, peer reading and choosing media to be inserted in the students' text.

In Indonesia, as one of the countries that enacts English as a foreign language, it is assumed that any certain strategies to use poetry writing model in learning English might be emerged from the students based on their learning experiences. Therefore, this study will find out any strategies used by English Department students in the process of writing their poetry.

### 3. Research Method

The study employed qualitative research design to explore and understand the problem of individual or groups (Creswell, 2014, p.32). It helps to know more about the problem and the progress that is faced by students in the process of writing poetry in a foreign language. This qualitative research used an ethnographic case study design to identify and delve on how a groups or individual develop the behavior from time to time (Creswell, 2014, p.48).

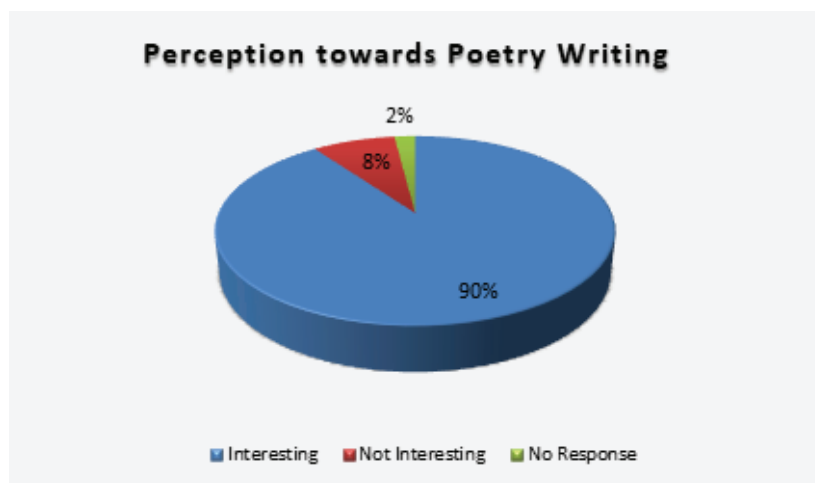
The participants of this study were 171 sixth-semester students taking a creative writing course in a state university in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The data of this study were collected through three instruments which include, 1) on-site observation conducted during the class meetings; 2) documentation in the forms of poetry books submitted by the students at the end of the semester; and 3) online survey consisting of close- and open-ended questions. In responding to the survey, the participants were asked to explain how they maneuvered through all class works and encouraged elaborate as much as possible in their answers. As part of consent agreement, the completed questionnaires were then labelled with numbers to maintain the participants' anonymity,

Frequency count was used to calculate the total number of responses related to the degree of interest in poetry writing. While, thematic content analysis was employed to identify clear trends in the different viewpoints of the data collected through the rest of the instruments. In order to fully understand and analyze participants' experiences and perspectives, the data were sorted, labeled, and analyzed. Finally, common themes were highlighted and presented as the findings of the study.

### 4. Result and Discussion

#### 4.1. Students' Perception of Poetry Writing

The analysis of the data collected through the close-ended part of the survey showed that in general, the students found poetry writing interesting. A closer look at the data in Figure 1 revealed that out of 171 participants, the majority ( $n = 154$ ) found poetry writing interesting, 13 showed no interest in the subject, while four students did not respond to the question. Contrary to some claims saying that English poetry is too difficult for EFL learners to deal with and therefore will be out of their reach and interest (Hanauer, 2012; Khatib, 2011; McGee, 2001), these findings proved the opposite and, thus, might be used as a reference to debunk the negative perception towards this genre of writing.



**Figure 1:** Students' perceptions towards poetry writing

## 4.2. Students' Strategies in Writing Poems

To answer the second research question related to the strategies the students employed when writing poems, the analysis of the data collected through the open-ended part of the survey, on-site observation, and students' poetry books revealed three main themes, which are presented below:

### 4.2.1. Theme 1: Using popular poem templates as idea starters

The first theme emerged from the data is the use of templates to help the students write their first poems following a format similar to the original one. In the first two meetings of the class, the students were introduced to English poems through some popular types of poetic forms such as *Acrostic Poem*, *Haiku*, *Cinquain*, *Ode*, etc. They were also provided some poem templates such as those in Figure 2 as parts of learning materials. The examples and the templates serve as a model and inspiration for language awareness as well as for some parallel writing. Through lecture presentation and exploration, the students developed their comprehension through various activities, such as brainstorming, predicting the content of the poem from the title, and discussing the meaning. Furthermore, to consolidate their language knowledge and improve their creative writing skills, they practiced writing similar poems in groups before writing them individually.

The students found this strategy very effective as an idea starter especially for those who were new and not familiar yet with poetry writing. Students' responses to the survey showed that the use of poem templates not only helped them to discover useful



Joy	To Give
Joy is Everywhere	The best thing to is to give
It is in the earth in the _____	To your enemy give _____
In the serenity of _____	To your opponent give _____
In the exuberance of _____	To a friend give _____
In the living _____	To a child give _____
In the perfect _____	To your father give _____
In the exercise of _____	To your mother give _____
In the beauty of _____	To yourself give _____
In the pleasure of _____	To all men give _____
Joy is everywhere	

Figure 2: Examples of poem templates

ideas to write about but also encouraged them to draw on their own experiences. Furthermore, they also admitted that the templates work effectively as a good model for creative writing that elicited emotional involvement as shown in Figure 3 and the following excerpts.

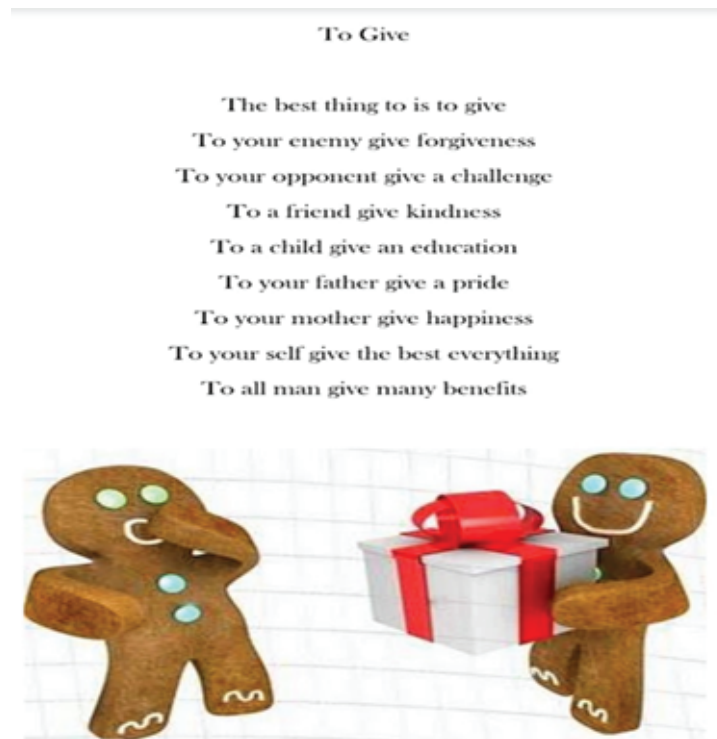
I think it really hard to write poetry in English, but the template really works!  
I can write it! (Excerpt 1)

The template makes me easier to write poetry. I just followed the rules of the template and I finish it. (Excerpt 2)

I think it is more interesting when we have to write about ourselves using it (the template). It makes me understand myself deeply. (Excerpt 3)

This finding supports what Schroeder (2010) claimed that templates can be used as the students' brainstorm. It means poem templates, especially the popular ones facilitate EFL learners in writing poetry. Furthermore, using this first strategy, the students unconsciously had experienced the benefit of poetry writing as part of meaningful literacy that helps them explore their personality. It is coherence with the purpose of Hanauer's (2012) first strategy which is to generate personal motivation for self-exploration of the students. Meanwhile, the use of popular templates to introduce English poems to the students and to stimulate their creative ideas drawn from personal experiences is similar to what Iida (2016) and Kırkgöz (2008) reported in their studies. Iida (2016) found that the students could easily understand Haiku poetry through the use

of templates at the beginning of the learning process, while Kırkgöz (2008) proved that using templates encouraged students to write poems reflecting their own experiences and gaining great emotional pleasure.



**Figure 3:** An example of student's work following the poem template

#### 4.2.2. Theme 2: Creating a vocabulary bank for writing rhyming poems

As stated by Mittal (2014) that a poem is a piece of writing form that arranged beautifully and rhythmically. In writing rhythmical poems, the students employed the second strategy by creating a vocabulary bank consisting of sound-a-like words. The students were given some examples of rhythmical poems and asked to create ones in groups. However, at this stage most of the students felt difficult in finding the words to use to make their poems rhythmical. Thus, the lecturer suggested them to make a list of vocabulary consisting of words with similar sounds. The words can be in any types of parts of speech and related to the students' interests. This vocabulary bank was later used as their reference when writing their rhythmical poems like that in Figure 4.

This strategy proved reliable to facilitate students in writing rhyming poems as well as to enrich their vocabularies as what the students admitted in the following excerpts:

At first, it is really difficult to choose the vocabulary based on its rhyming. However, this vocabulary bank really assists me to do not need to think before write. I can easily choose from my bank. (Excerpt 4)

It is really hard to make a rhyming poem, but this vocabulary bank is really helpful. Then, I also learn new words from this vocabulary bank. Especially about emotional vocabulary (Excerpt 5)

This vocabulary bank makes me easily choose the words what I want to express. For example, it is that simple, when I want to express my activity in my poetry, I can easily pick the words from the verb listed in the bank. (Excerpt 6)

The benefit of this strategy in helping the students expand their vocabulary is in line with Kellem's (2009) statement emphasizing the benefit of poetry writing as a pedagogical practice in learning English is because it introduces vocabulary in context. Similarly, Mittal (2014) also argues that learners will learn about figure of speech, adjectives, phrases and symbolic words spontaneously when they learn to write poetry. Furthermore, as a model of creative writing this activity proved what Kırkgöz (2014) stated that the language development of vocabulary will be improved in the process of learning it.

The creation of vocabulary bank to help learners create rhyming poems was also practiced by the students in Kellem's (2009) study during the form and meaning activities. In these activities, the students were guided to form some words and understand the meaning of the words by doing alternative word exercise, listening cloze and listing some words in poems. As a result, the students attended to the language of a poem.

#### **4.2.3. Theme 3: Building emotions through personal story sharing and later channeling them through poetry writing**

The last strategy emerged from the data was emotion channeling through personal story sharing. This strategy was inspired from one of the activities during the teaching and learning process. In one of the sessions, the lecturer shared a story of her life struggle as an international student. While listening to the story, all of the students looked emotionally engaged as if they took part in the story themselves. The class atmosphere was also much affected when silence dominated and the only sound heard was the tremble voice of the lecturer and the hidden sob of the students. By the end of the story, the lecturer asked the students what they thought about the story and asked them to write it down. Surprisingly, many students turned the free writing session



**Figure 4:** An example of student's rhythmic poem

to emotionally-filled poems. Thus, in the next class meeting, the lecturer asked the students to sit in pairs and told each other a personal story they found memorable and worth sharing. Once this story sharing activity ended, they were asked to write a poem related to the story they shared and/or listen to.

The effectiveness of this strategy in helping the students write their poems was also admitted by the students themselves which could be observed in the following excerpts:

As the story goes on, I felt my emotions grows as same as the lecturer's emotion. I like being brought into the story and experiencing the same events as her. Happy, amazed, confused and finally at the end of the story, I couldn't handle my sad feeling about the struggle she should face. It also made me remember about my family at home. Then when she informed us to use this emotion in our poetry, I just felt like know where I should express this. (Excerpt 7)

Now, I knew why poetry can have a deep meaning. Because after this meeting, I felt like my emotion need a place to be expressed. It got me

emotional because the story also reminded me about my journey to get into this campus. (Excerpt 8)

I think I can make a lot of poetries after this meeting. I can also make one about her story. It really got me emotionally. I had my vocabulary bank already and it was really helpful. (Excerpt 9)

As stated by Iida (2016), this strategy stimulates the students' memories of personal experiences and life such as those related to their families and school lives. Furthermore, it successfully shifted their focus to the meaning carried out in their poems instead of the forms of language. This finding also supports Celly's (2009) statement that writing poetry is a creative and reflection approach. In this study, when the lecturer shared her personal experiences, unconsciously, the students reflected the story to theirs. Therefore, they could emotionally involve and feel the same way as the lecturer did. Furthermore, this kind of strategy has some similar points with what Hanauer (2012) did to his ESL College Writing class. At the second step of his strategy, Hanauer (2012) initiated a process of autobiographical exploration in which he directed the students to make life maps and mark out their life experiences then guided them in an imagination where the students were asked to visualize and relive past experiences. In this current study, the students were directed to explore their personal experiences through personal story sharing. Unconsciously, the students explored their own life-experiences when they listened to the lecturer's personal story and their peers' as seen in Figure 5.

Overall, the three strategies the students employed in this study had effectively helped them to write English poems and finish their poetry book project. These findings indicate that poetry writing has the potential to be incorporated into the EFL class curriculum in Indonesia. Furthermore, writing poems about students' personal experiences and emotions truly reflect what meaningful literacy means since they write about something emotionally engaging to them. Furthermore, writing poems could promote the learning of vocabulary that can be transferred to not only writing but also to everyday use. Finally, these findings could also be used to debunk the negative stigma that writing is difficult to do and not interesting for EFL students

## 5. Conclusion

This study reported Indonesian EFL students' perception of poetry writing and the strategies they used to successfully finish their poetry books as a Creative Writing class requirement. Contradict to the common assumption that most EFL students could not enjoy English poems and would find it boring, monotonous and uninteresting, the

## MY CLOUDY DAY



**Figure 5:** An example of student's poems about personal experiencesm

students in this study unexpectedly perceived poetry writing positively and showed high interest in writing poems for their English writing class. Furthermore, they did not appear to face significant difficulties in producing poems for their poetry book project. Thus, the common assumption saying that writing poems in EFL context is too difficult for students to deal with could be debunked.

Furthermore, this study elaborates three strategies the students used in breaking the deadlock of ideas when composing poems, *first*, the use of poem templates as idea starters; *second*, the creation of a vocabulary bank for writing rhyming poems; and *third*, emotions building and channeling through personal story sharing. These three strategies might also be useful for other EFL learners and might be effective to the other genre of writing.

Finally, this study recommends the incorporation of poetry writing as a pedagogical practice of meaningful literacy as it is one effective way to make EFL learners personally involve in the learning process. It is a simple task through which learners can express

their personal feelings in a written work and deem that the result is really meaningful for them.

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