



TEACHING POETRY

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Zerrin EREN

'First Day at School' by Roger McGough

Presentation paper by

Ahmet Can UYAR

19250122

Roger McGough

Award-winning poet, playwright, broadcaster and children's author Roger McGough was born on 9 November 1937 in Liverpool, England. He was educated at Hull University. After attending the University of Hull to study French and geography, McGough dabbled as a pop singer and lyricist in the band the Scaffold. Along with his two band mates, including Beatles-brother Mike McCartney, he earned minor fame for his song "Lily the Pink," which reached number one on the UK charts in 1968. During this period, he made his name as one of the 'Liverpool Poets' included in *The Mersey Sound: Penguin Modern Poets 10 (1967)*. Liverpool Poets is a group of poets, including Roger McGough, committed to reviving poetry as a public, performed art. McGough has had by far the most steady and continuous success, quickly becoming a household name throughout Britain. He is also a prolific writer. He has published over 50 books of poetry for adults and children, along with numerous plays, and he has always been a very active performance poet as well as a writer.

McGough is known for his accessibility. His poetry reaches a wide audience and he has always been keen to stay out of the ivory tower of academia and 'high brow' poetry that is inaccessible to the general reader. However, as an accessible and extremely popular poet, he has always struggled with the attitude that assumes that his work is not worthy of serious literary attention. For McGough, poetry is a form of subversion, and this can be serious or humorous, or both simultaneously. In his poetry for adults, his use of humour has evolved throughout his career, and his deceptively simple, quirky and witty style incorporates all manner of serious issues and perceptive insights. The poetry of McGough has been the subject of academic study. It has been characterised, at least from its early examples, as being reliant on play with words and their meanings. It has also been noted to exhibit a stylised wit, and, at times, a sadness based on themes of lost youth, unfulfilled relationships, and the downside of city life. McGough's voice has always epitomised the working-class Liverpool of his childhood: down-to-earth, unpretentious, dry, witty, ironic and sceptical. He engages in mischievous word-play, particularly that of inventing his own words or word combinations, and he mocks and subverts clichés and other overly-familiar expressions. In 'First Day at School', he uses this approach to convey the child's overwhelmed and confused state of mind. The speaker is 'A millionbillionwillion miles from home / Waiting for the bell to go (To go where?)', while 'glassrooms' are 'Whole rooms made out of glass' and the 'Tea-cher' is the 'one who makes the tea'. Although McGough's style has matured and developed over the years, he remains true to his roots as an accessible, down-to-earth poet who is not only in touch with the world of the commonplace and the ordinary person, but celebrates it with an unsentimental warmth and affection.

References

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Analysis of 'First Day at School' by Roger McGough

The poem is about the feelings of a child during his or her first day at school. Throughout the poem, we see the anxiety, curiosity, misunderstandings, and perhaps the ignorance of a child. The poet adopts an identity of a child on the first day of school and depicts the mood of the child throughout the poem. The poem does not consist of advanced poetic techniques, but rather it is written in a simple style to show the simplicity of the way children view the outer world compared to adults. There is no rhyme in the poem, it is written in the style of free verse. To enhance the plausibility, the poet intentionally misspells some words in the poem as a pre-school child would do. The poem consists of 3 stanzas and 27 lines in total. The only figure of speech used in the poem is hyperbole.

(1) "A millionbillionwillion miles from home"

In the first line (1), we see the exaggeration for the distance between the child's home and the school, which refers to the extent the child feels far from home on the first day of the school. It is a new place for the child, and perhaps it is the first time s/he feels so far from home without the parents. This leads the child to express the distance with the wordplay 'millionbillionwillion' as in the line. The only figure of speech, which is hyperbole, we encounter in this poem is in the line (1).

(2) "Waiting for the bell to go. (To go where?)"

The following line (2) refers to the way that the child knows something, perhaps s/he has been told by the mother, that they need to wait for the bell to go somewhere, whether it is home or for a break. But the child could not really understand what the bell signifies exactly that is why s/he is confused as "To go where?".

(3) "Why are they all so big, other children? So noisy? So much at home they Must have been born in uniform."

The child suddenly realizes that other children look bigger than him/her. S/he realizes that all of them are so noisy and they act so relaxed as if they were at home, in contrast with himself/herself. This deepens the alienated feelings of the child as s/he starts realizing the differences between the others and him/her. Then the child thinks that they all look fit in the uniforms they wear and they look so comfortable, so it is like they have always been wearing those uniforms. Again, the child compares himself/herself to the others and feels lonely again.

(4) "Lived all their lives in playgrounds Spent the years inventing games That don't let me in. Games That are rough, that swallow you up"

In the lines (4), the child keeps observing the other big children in the school yard and examines the games they play. The child probably watch the others from a corner of the yard silently, then realizes the different games that the other children play. The games that s/he has not known before, therefore s/he thinks that they have spent their lives in playgrounds inventing new games. However, s/he also hypothesizes that these games are designed for big children, therefore the other children would not let the child join them since the games are dangerous for young child. We can understand this worry from the last line in (4), from the phrase ‘games that swallow you up’ which refers to the way that the child views those games kind of dangerous. The poet is aware of the fact that a young child would view the older children as a potential threat, and this fact is represented in the lines in (4).

(5) **“And the railings.
All around the railings.”**

After feeling alienated and mentally rejected by the other children, the child starts observing the space surrounding him/her and realizes the railings surrounding the school yard.

(6) **“Are they to keep out wolves and monsters?
Things that carry off and eat children?
Things you don’t take sweets from?”**

In the lines (6), the child starts reasoning the existing of the railings around the schoolyard. Based on the imaginary world of the child, s/he firstly thinks that these railing must be there for the threats from the outer world. Probably based on the stories s/he knows, such as Little Red Riding Hood, the child says ‘wolves’ rather than any other animal. We can support this claim by the following line ‘carry off and eat children’, referring to the elements of the story Little Red Riding Hood. The other word, ‘monsters’ and the other following line ‘things you don’t take sweets from’ can be associated with the Halloween, again based on the personal experiences of the child. In link with these reasons, the child prefers to express his/her hypothesis about the existing of the railings like this at first.

(7) **“Perhaps they’re to stop us getting out
Running away from the lessins.”**

However, then the child starts being more rational and view the real reason why the railings are there in the lines (7). Maybe the child saw a student trying to escape from the school garden, maybe remembered something, or maybe associated with these railings with the railings of a jail and deduced that these are also to keep people inside of something. The child also misspells the word *lessons* as ‘lessins’, as the child does not know how to write, and just heard the word *lesson* from the others. The poet again tries to be like a real child with these wordplays, as it is also the style of the poet as mentioned before.

(8) **“What does a lessin look like? Lessin.
Sounds small and slimy.
They keep them in the classrooms.
Whole rooms made out of glass. Imagine.”**

Then the child starts to question the concept of 'lesson', with the misspelled version 'lessin' as in (8). We see the imagination of the child while 'lessin' is depicted. We also see another misconception of the word *classroom* as 'glassroom'. Maybe the reason why the child imagines a 'lessin' to be small and slimy is because the worms s/he saw before, worms which were kept in classrooms at a botanic park or something.

(9) **“I wish I could remember my name
Mummy said it would come in useful.
Like wellies. When there’s puddles.
Yellowwellies. I wish she was here.”**

Along with the beginning of the third stanza in (9), we witness the complex nature of a child's mind, jumping between thoughts. The child suddenly turns to another topic. The child probably cannot remember his/her surname, and s/he is aware of the fact that it will be needed as the mummy said. Then the child associates the benefits of remembering surnames with the benefits of wellies when it is raining. Probably the child has been told similar things before, therefore s/he remembers these things. Then s/he wishes his/her mummy to be there so she can help him/her.

(10) **“I think my name is sewn on somewhere
Perhaps the teacher will read it for me.
Tea-cher. The one who makes the tea.”**

The last lines of the poem, as in (10), refer to the things that the child is probably told before. The child's mom probably told him/her that the teacher would read the names. The poem finishes with a cute misunderstanding, 'teacher, the one who makes the tea'. Since the child's native language is English, s/he knows that the -er suffix puts the word in doer position, as in speak-speaker. The child's logic lets it to be this way in the word *teacher* as the tea maker. According to Piaget's cognitive development stages, this kind of logic in children is seen in the pre-operational stage (2-7 years old) and it is called '*transductive reasoning*'. In this period, children think that if something is like this in one case, then it has to be like that in all the cases. Therefore, since the child in the poem is in the pre-operational stage, thinks that if the -er suffix makes the meaning like that in other cases, then it has to do the same in the word *teacher*.

The poem successfully reflects the mind of a school child on the first day of the school, including anxiety, misconceptions, misunderstandings, fear, and confusion. Throughout the poem, we witness the stream of consciousness of the child as the topics jumped from one to another. The poet tries to keep readers on the track of a child's mind from the beginning to the end of the poem.

References

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TEACHING 'FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL' by ROGER MCGOUGH

This poem can be taught to 5th grade students. The following activities are designed considering the level of 5th grade students. By teaching this poem in an ELT class, the following objectives can be set:

- Learners will learn several vocabulary items like wolf, monster, big, railings, wellies, etc.
- Learners will learn the pronunciations of several words like teacher, wolves, uniform, etc.
- Learners will learn the correct spellings of the words like classroom, lesson, teacher, etc.
- Learners will improve their prosodic skills in asking questions.

Materials & Activities

1. Video Presentation: Firstly, for students to listen to the poem and as a warm up activity, a video can be shown. This video consists of pictures prepared according to the flow of the poem and a sound recording of the poem. This video will help learners to visualize the poem and notice some vocabulary items. It will also help students to hear the correct prosodic features of asking questions in a rising tone. The vocabulary items in the video will be the basis of the next activity, therefore, it is important for learners to have some ideas on these words and the story of the poem. These vocabulary items are as follows:

- home - wolf - tea - uniform - puddle
- bell - railing - playground - monster - wellies

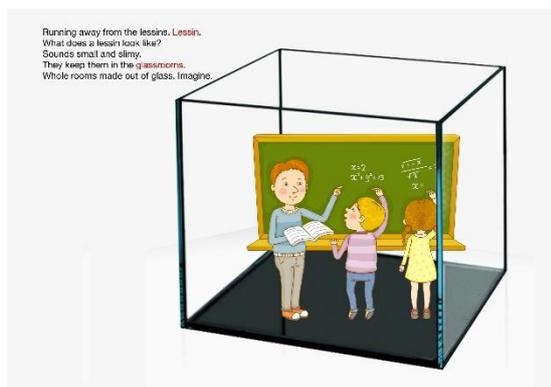
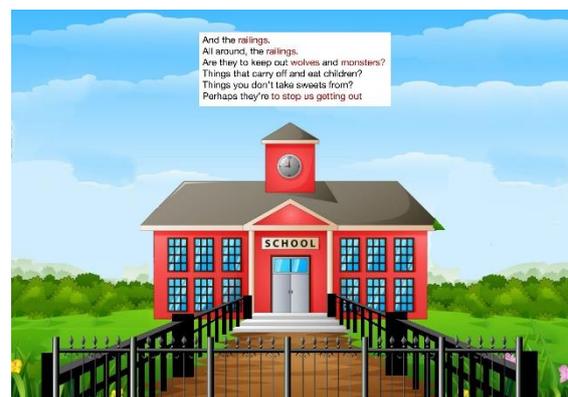
2. Story Book: After watching the video, a new material is introduced to the students. This material is a story book created according to the story in the poem. This material will help learners to internalize the story flow in the poem and internalize the vocabulary items they learned. The visual representation of the poem will be good for learners to learn the poem better in a fun way.

In this material, some pictures are created according to the lines of the poem. The lines of the related picture are put on the top of the page. In lines, some words are written in red. The visual representations of the red words are missing in the picture. Students are expected to find the missing word in the picture from the sticker board and stick it onto an appropriate place on the picture. For example, below you can see a sample page of the story book and the stickers:



(Sticker board)

In this given sample page, students (one by one) are expected to find the correspondence picture of the word *playground* from the stickers and put it on the page to complete the picture. Each page of the story book consists of a similar task. At the end, when all the pictures in the book are completed, the poem is read by all the class members from the beginning with the completed pictures. All of the pages of the story book are as follows (including the cover page):



3. Cup Vocab Game: After completing the picture story book, teacher introduces a game for students to internalize the vocabulary items they studied. This game consists of a paper which has the pictures of 14 words on it and 14 coffee cups corresponding to the vocabulary items. These words are a mixture of both the newly learned words (railing, bell, etc.) and the already known words (books, pencil, etc.) by the students. The class is divided into two groups. Respectively, one student from each group comes to the board and tries to match the coffee cups with the corresponding pictures in 30 seconds. When 30 seconds is over, the correct matchings will be counted. Then one student comes from the other group and the same procedure is applied. This will go on like this, and at the end, the scores of each group will be calculated in total and the group with the higher score will win the game.



4. Ordering the Lines Activity: After students get associated with the poem at this level, they are expected to order the lines of the poem. Teacher sticks the lines of the poem in a jumbled way on the board. Students are asked to come to the board one by one and order the lines of the texts correctly.

	First Day at School by Roger McGough
A millionbillionwillion miles from home Waiting for the bell to go. (To go where?)	
Why are they all so big, other children? So noisy? So much at home they Must have been born in uniform	Running away from the lessins. Lessin. What does a lessin look like?
Lived all their lives in playgrounds Spent the years inventing games That don't let me in. Games That are rough, that swallow you up.	Sounds small and slimy. They keep them in the classrooms. Whole rooms made out of glass. Imagine.
And the railings. All around, the railings. Are they to keep out wolves and monsters?	I wish I could remember my name Mummy said it would come in useful.
Things that carry off and eat children? Things you don't take sweets from? Perhaps they're to stop us getting out	Like wellies. When there's puddles. Yellowwellies. I wish she was here.
	I think my name is sewn on somewhere Perhaps the teacher will read it for me. Tea-cher. The one who makes the tea.

5. Ring for the Answer Game: In this game, the essential material, a bell is placed in the middle of a table. The class is divided into two groups and two students in each turn come to play the game. Students stand on both sides of the table with the bell between them. The bell is there for students to hit when they want to give an answer. The teacher starts to read the poem and he suddenly stops at some part of the line. The competing students are expected to finish the line. The student who hit the bell earlier has the right to do it. At the end, correct completions of each group are calculated and the winner group is determined.

