

The Use of The Poem Desiderata by Max Ehrmann in Teaching Writing to The First-Year Students in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study analyzes the teaching implementation of the poem Desiderata by Max Ehrmann for writing classes with first year university students. Specifically, this study aims to find out how pedagogy with literary works, particularly poems, can contribute in shaping and improving writing skills among students in higher learning institutions. The study was conducted qualitatively at a private university in Bandung, West Java with a sample of 30 students from the English education department. The students had been taught about the poem Desiderata, after which they participated in reflection and expressive writing activities related to its themes. Results showed that incorporating poetry enhanced creativity and self-expression while also fostering emotional engagement. Students improved their ability to produce coherent reflective texts rich in language and expression while drawing on literature for moral contemplation stimulated personal development within the context of writing. This paper highlights constructive approaches such as instruction based on developmental suitability, supporting freely chosen literary frameworks enhances tertiary level writing programs through flexible guided methods fosters effective skill mastery.

Keywords: Creative Writing; Literary Values; Reflective Expression; Prose Poetry; Emotional Engagement

INTRODUCTION

In English teaching, the integration of literary works has been shown to enhance not only language skills but also aid in the development of empathy and reflection among students. Especially noteworthy is poetry due to its heightened emotional intensity and creativity (Vk & Savaedi, 2014). Research indicates that poems foster a deeper level of idea expression, prompting learners to think and speak more confidently (Cronin & Hawthorne, 2019; Healy & Smyth, 2017). Desiderata, a prose poem by Max Ehrmann, embodies universal themes of self-respect, moral integrity, and resilience. When used in classroom settings, it has the potential to enhance students' personal voice in writing by connecting their emotional responses with structural coherence. Moreover, the poem aligns with current pedagogical trends such as Writing-Enriched Curricula, which integrates writing across disciplines to develop critical and expressive skills. This study aims to explore how the poem Desiderata can be employed effectively in teaching writing to first-year English education students. By examining students' writing outcomes, this research seeks to demonstrate how literature-based pedagogy contributes both scientifically by enhancing writing fluency and complexity and practically by nurturing reflective and authentic writers in higher education. The pedagogical power of literature in language teaching lies in its ability to engage learners intellectually, emotionally, and creatively. Poetry, particularly, provides concise yet profound models of language use that challenge students to think beyond mechanical language competency.

Scholars emphasize that teaching literature should move beyond transmission of knowledge and toward the cultivation of active, reflective learners (Belo et al., 2016; Creely et al., 2022;

Lim et al., 2022). Their pedagogical vision calls for a student-centered approach where learners engage with texts critically, personally, and collaboratively. Louise Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory supports the use of poetry in writing development, describing reading as a dynamic transaction between text and reader (Kırkgöz, 2014). This approach encourages students to compose writing that stems from their own responses, leading to more authentic and meaningful texts.

Recent studies also highlight how literature, particularly moral and philosophical poetry, can enhance students' writing by enriching vocabulary, reinforcing grammatical structures, and encouraging depth of thought (Kırkgöz, 2014; Tevdovska, 2016). Literature introduces students to the nuances of tone, metaphor, and rhythm all of which contribute to more sophisticated written expression. Moreover, when students encounter themes such as peace, purpose, self-worth, and resilience as found in *Desiderata* they are often moved to reflect more deeply and write more sincerely.

The role of literature in language education continues to be a focus of growing scholarly attention due to its holistic contributions to students' linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and cultural development. Literature is not merely a vehicle for language exposure; it is a multidimensional text form that opens access to complex meanings, societal values, and human experiences (Hossain, 2024; Tevdovska, 2016). Within the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, literature holds the potential to humanize language learning by engaging the learner's imagination, empathy, and critical awareness (Hossain, 2024; Pertiwi, 2022; Radfar & Lengkanawati, 2020). When carefully selected and pedagogically framed, literary texts can provoke inquiry, spark emotional responses, and promote reflective thinking traits that are especially crucial in academic writing and self-expression.

Among literary genres, poetry is perhaps the most intimate and linguistically potent. The condensed and carefully crafted nature of poetry invites learners to slow down and pay close attention to word choice, tone, rhythm, sound, and symbolism. As a result, students interact with language in ways that are far more nuanced than those typically offered in conventional prose texts. Poetry is also inherently personal; it often invites readers into the emotional and psychological space of the speaker. This opens a pedagogical space for learners to connect deeply with texts not only at the level of meaning, but also at the level of voice, feeling, and moral reflection (Hanauer, 2010; Rosenblatt, 1994).

The pedagogical power of poetry becomes even more pronounced when framed within a student-centered approach. (Chambers & Gregory, 2006) assert that literary instruction should not be reduced to decoding authorial intent or memorizing facts about literary movements. Rather, literature should serve as a mirror through which learners explore their own identities and as a window through which they see the diverse experiences of others. This view is also emphasized in more contemporary writing pedagogy, which sees writing not just as a skill to master but as a process of meaning-making (Styati & Rodliyah, 2021). When students engage with poetry as both readers and writers, they are invited to enter into a dialogue with the text, reflect on their personal responses, and translate those responses into writing.

This engagement is best understood through the lens of Louise Rosenblatt's Reader-Response Theory, which argues that the act of reading is not passive but transactional. That is, the text and the reader co-construct meaning through the reader's prior experiences, emotions, and interpretation. In the classroom, this theory encourages educators to create space for students' voices to emerge. Instead of searching for a "correct" interpretation, learners are encouraged to articulate their own perspectives fostering not only critical literacy but also confidence and ownership of thought. This process is deeply connected to writing development. When students respond to literature from a place of personal resonance, their writing becomes more purposeful, sincere, and expressive (Lee & Mao, 2024; Pino Castillo et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhang, 2023)

Furthermore, poetry supports key dimensions of writing: vocabulary development, grammatical precision, sentence variation, and coherence of ideas. It offers a rich linguistic input for noticing patterns in word choice, metaphor, repetition, and parallelism. According to (Cronin & Hawthorne, 2019), students who engage with poetry in structured classroom settings are more likely to demonstrate improved stylistic awareness and complexity in their own written texts. Because poems often contain unfamiliar or abstract language, learners must negotiate meaning an active cognitive process that leads to better retention of form and function. Students are also motivated to emulate poetic language in their personal compositions, using creative strategies to express their emotions, beliefs, and experiences.

The use of poetry in early-semester writing courses is especially effective because it provides an emotionally safe entry point into academic writing. Many first-year students enter higher education with limited confidence in their ability to express ideas in English. They may associate writing with rigid structures and fear of error. However, when invited to respond to a poem like *Desiderata*, students often find language that speaks to them. The poem's uplifting tone, universal themes, and philosophical depth create a supportive context for students to explore difficult questions about life, identity, and growth. Students are often surprised by their capacity to write when the topic feels personal and the form feels freeing. This aligns with the findings of (Healy & Smyth, 2017) , who found that poetry-based tasks enabled students to unlock emotions and thoughts that might remain hidden in more conventional writing formats. *Desiderata* by Max Ehrmann, in particular, exemplifies an ideal poem for writing instruction. It is written in accessible language yet conveys profound truths about how to live meaningfully. The structure is simple mostly imperative statements and the themes are deeply human: tolerance, humility, strength, and peace. These qualities make it a useful model for personal and reflective writing. Students can respond to its messages, mirror its structure, and even create their own versions. Such writing activities not only reinforce grammatical and rhetorical forms but also deepen students' engagement with ethical reasoning and self-expression. As noted by (Abbott & Lee, 2023; Hossain, 2024; Lee & Mao, 2024; Lim et al., 2022; Tevdovska, 2016) , when students engage with literature that mirrors their inner thoughts and life questions, they become more invested in their writing, producing work that is both technically sound and emotionally rich.

Literature-based instruction especially through poetry also contributes to identity formation and voice development in EFL learners. When students are given the space to write about who they are, what they believe, and what they hope for, writing becomes an act of affirmation. It becomes a tool not just for academic achievement but for personal transformation. In multilingual or multicultural classrooms, this becomes even more essential, as poetry can bridge the personal and academic, the local and global, the expressive and the analytical. In conclusion, a growing body of research supports the integration of poetry in the teaching of writing, especially for early-stage learners in higher education. Through its form, themes, and interpretive openness, poetry fosters engagement, reflection, and voice three pillars of effective writing. When coupled with reflective pedagogies like Reader-Response Theory, poetry becomes a powerful means through which students not only learn to write, but learn to see writing as a meaningful, expressive act. *Desiderata*, with its timeless guidance and accessible style, is uniquely positioned to fulfill this role, making it a valuable addition to the writing classroom in today's evolving educational landscape.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach suited for examining how individuals experience and interpret a phenomenon in a natural setting, based on the framework provided by (Creswell, 2018). Qualitative descriptive studies are typically used when the goal is to provide straightforward summaries of experiences or events, without the use of complex theoretical interpretation. This approach was selected to examine how the poem *Desiderata* by Max Ehrmann could be implemented as a tool for enhancing students' writing performance and emotional engagement.

The research was conducted at a private university in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia, and involved 30 first-year students from an English Education program. These students were selected using purposive sampling (Silverman, 2005), as they represented a group that was in the early stages of academic writing development and had not yet been introduced to literature-based writing practices. Their shared academic level and exposure made them ideal for investigating the outcomes of a structured poetry-based intervention. The teaching intervention was implemented over the course of four classroom sessions. In the first session, the poem *Desiderata* was introduced, along with background information about the author, Max Ehrmann, and the philosophical tone and moral themes of the poem. The poem was read aloud by the instructor, followed by a silent reading by students. During this process, students were encouraged to underline or highlight any lines that resonated with them emotionally or intellectually. In the second session, a guided class discussion was held using principles from Reader-Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1994). Students were prompted to reflect on specific lines they found meaningful, and they were encouraged to connect the poem's ideas to their personal lives, beliefs, and emotional states. Sample prompts included: "Which line spoke to you most?" and "How does this poem relate to your own experiences or values?"

The third and fourth sessions focused on the writing tasks. Students first composed a reflective essay, articulating their interpretation of *Desiderata* and the personal significance they derived from its content. Following that, students engaged in a creative writing assignment in which they composed their own version of the poem, titled "My *Desiderata*." This allowed them to model the structure, tone, and values of the original while expressing their own insights and aspirations. These two tasks were designed to assess students' ability to write with clarity, coherence, and emotional depth.

The data for this study were collected through multiple qualitative sources that provided rich, firsthand insights into students' learning experiences and writing development. These sources included the students' written products, such as reflective essays and creative versions of the poem titled "My *Desiderata*," which served as the primary evidence of their expressive and structural writing abilities. In addition, the researcher-maintained classroom observation notes throughout each session, documenting students' levels of participation, emotional responses, and interaction with the poem and writing tasks. Finally, students were asked to complete individual written reflections at the end of the intervention, in which they shared their personal learning experiences, emotional reactions to *Desiderata*, and perceptions of how the poem influenced their writing. These three data sources were triangulated to ensure depth and reliability in the thematic analysis. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative data. Codes were developed inductively, based on key themes such as emotional engagement, writing fluency, and personal expression. These themes were then interpreted in light of the research objectives, producing insights into how literary-based instruction shaped students' writing development and classroom experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study investigated the use of Max Ehrmann's *Desiderata* as a literary-based instructional tool in a first-year university writing classroom. Data were collected through students' reflective journals, writing assignments, and classroom observations. The qualitative analysis revealed three major findings: (1) increased emotional engagement with the writing process, (2) improvement in writing fluency, vocabulary use, and structural awareness, and (3) the emergence of a more authentic and personal writing voice.

1. Emotional Engagement with the Text and Writing Activities

One of the most prominent results of the intervention was the heightened emotional engagement demonstrated by students. Rather than viewing the poem as a purely academic text, students interacted with *Desiderata* as a meaningful source of personal reflection. During class discussions, many students referred to specific lines from the poem and connected them to their own life experiences. Lines such as "*Go placidly amid the noise and haste*" and "*You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars*" were frequently mentioned as particularly impactful.

Students expressed their reactions through comments such as:

"This line reminds me to stay calm when everything around me feels overwhelming."

"Reading this made me realize that my existence matters."

"It feels like the poem understands what I am going through."

These responses indicate that students were emotionally invested in the learning process. This engagement was also reflected in their written work. Reflective essays showed greater emotional depth, clearer themes, and more sincere self-expression compared to students' earlier writing tasks. Many students appeared more motivated to write, not simply to complete an assignment, but to articulate their thoughts and feelings meaningfully.

2. Improvement in Writing Fluency, Vocabulary Use, and Structural Awareness

The analysis of students' writing samples before and after the intervention showed noticeable improvements in several aspects of writing. In terms of fluency, students began to produce longer and more coherent sentences. Their writing shifted from short, repetitive simple sentences to the use of compound and complex structures, suggesting increased confidence and syntactic awareness.

Vocabulary use also improved. After engaging with *Desiderata*, students experimented with more expressive and abstract lexical choices, including words such as "*tranquil*," "*serenity*," "*faithfulness*," and "*perspective*." These words reflected the tone and message of the poem and indicated that students were able to transfer vocabulary from the literary text into their own writing.

In addition, students demonstrated better control of paragraph structure. Many compositions included clear topic sentences followed by supporting ideas and examples. For instance, a student who initially wrote a series of disconnected sentences about anxiety and future goals later produced a well-organized paragraph that combined reflection, explanation, and textual reference. This suggests that students developed a stronger understanding of coherence and unity in academic writing.

3. Emergence of Personal Voice and Authentic Expression

Another significant result was the development of a more authentic personal voice in students' writing. The post-intervention texts revealed that students were more willing to express their beliefs, emotions, and personal struggles. Many students chose to write pieces titled "*My Desiderata*," in which they articulated personal values and life principles inspired by the poem. Examples of students' expressions include:

“I no longer compare myself to others. I compare myself to who I was yesterday.”

“Silence can be my strength, not my weakness.”

“My path may not be perfect, but it is mine.”

These statements demonstrate that students were not merely practicing linguistic forms but were using writing as a means of self-exploration. Classroom observations further supported this finding, as students participated more actively in discussions, engaged more openly with peers, and appeared more confident in sharing their ideas. Overall, the learning environment became more collaborative and supportive, encouraging students to take creative and emotional risks in their writing.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the potential of poetry-based instruction to enhance both affective and cognitive dimensions of writing development in EFL classrooms. The use of *Desiderata* created opportunities for students to engage emotionally with the text, which in turn influenced their motivation, confidence, and writing performance.

The strong emotional engagement observed among students can be explained through Rosenblatt's (1994) transactional theory of reading, which emphasizes the active role of the reader in constructing meaning. Students did not simply interpret the poem for its linguistic features; instead, they related its philosophical messages to their own experiences. This personal connection appears to have shifted students' attitudes toward writing, transforming it from a mechanical task into a reflective and meaningful activity. The improvement in writing fluency, vocabulary use, and structural organization suggests that poetry can function as an effective linguistic scaffold. The rhythmic language, figurative expressions, and reflective tone of *Desiderata* provided students with an implicit model of well-structured and expressive writing. These findings are consistent with previous research (Arafat et al., 2025; Cronin & Hawthorne, 2019; Healy & Smyth, 2017; Inayah & Argawati, 2019; Vekari & Savaedi, 2014), which indicates that poetry-based tasks can enhance EFL learners' writing fluency and coherence when learners are encouraged to interpret texts creatively. Furthermore, the emergence of authentic student voice supports the effectiveness of the reader-response approach in writing instruction. By validating personal interpretations and emotional responses, the classroom environment became more inclusive and supportive. This aligns with earlier studies (Apsari, 2018; Damayanti, 2017; Kırkgöz, 2014) that emphasize the role of poetry in fostering self-expression, identity construction, and reflective maturity among EFL learners. Taken together, these findings suggest that poetry, when integrated thoughtfully into writing instruction, can serve a dual pedagogical purpose. It not only supports the development of linguistic and structural writing skills but also nurtures students' emotional awareness and personal voice. For beginner-level university students, particularly those who may lack confidence in academic writing, poetry offers an accessible and meaningful entry point into expressive and reflective writing practices.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the use of Max Ehrmann's poem *Desiderata* in teaching writing to first-year students in higher education. The findings revealed that integrating poetry into writing instruction can significantly enhance students' emotional engagement, fluency, and personal expression. Through reflective essays and creative rewriting tasks, students were encouraged to connect deeply with the poem's messages, resulting in more thoughtful and meaningful written work.

The emotional resonance of *Desiderata*, combined with the use of Reader-Response pedagogy, allowed students to see writing as a tool for self-exploration rather than merely a technical skill.

Moreover, the structured yet expressive nature of poetry supported the development of academic language and rhetorical techniques in a way that traditional texts often do not. These outcomes suggest that poetry especially one that conveys timeless values and moral guidance can be a powerful resource in early academic writing instruction. Practically, this research encourages educators to consider literary-based approaches that foster emotional intelligence, personal voice, and critical reflection in writing tasks. Scientifically, it contributes to the field of English language teaching by affirming the role of literature as a multidimensional pedagogical tool.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to the students of the English Education Department at IKIP Siliwangi Cimahi, West Java, Indonesia who participated in this study. Special thanks to the community of researchers and educators whose insights into literary pedagogy inspired the design and direction of this work.

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