

# An Inspiring Experience of Poem Teaching

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## Success

*To laugh often and much;  
to win the respect of intelligent people  
and the affection of children;  
to earn the appreciation of honest critics  
and endure the betrayal of false friends;  
to appreciate beauty; to find the best in  
others;  
to leave the world a bit better,  
whether by a healthy child,  
a garden patch  
or a redeemed social condition;  
to know even one life has breathed easier  
because you have lived.  
This is to have succeeded.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

This is a short poem for a warm-up activity before the students start to cultivate the main theme of 'Successful People & Amazing Deeds' in their English text reading.

It was written by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), a well-known American transcendentalist poet, philosopher and essayist during the 19th century, whose writings are considered major documents of 19th-century American literature, religion and thought.

'Success' can be regarded as an elaborately written short poem full of living philosophy. Cordial, plain, yet persuasive in tone, it vividly depicts the poet's humble heart and open mind, his optimistic attitude and perception towards life. It tells us that we do not have to undertake great tasks to become a hero or winner in life. On the contrary, we can make it by doing well in our ordinary life and behaviour, i.e. in the ways we treat our family, friends or colleagues, even our opponents or enemies, how we harmonize ourselves with the natural surroundings and how we cherish our physical fitness, etc., all

of which can be achieved as long as we have a kind heart and a passion for life.

However, not every student can fully understand the profound philosophic meanings this poem embraces mainly due to their young age and lack of life experiences. In an attempt to help them have a better understanding of the poem's implications, as well as initiate their literary creativity, I tried to apply the method of translation and self-creation to the teaching of the poem this year.

First, I had the students divided into small groups to discuss and translate the poem into Chinese. I would like my students to be able to distinguish the minor differences among Chinese synonyms when the poem was read in Chinese, such as 'a garden patch', 'has breathed easier', and 'redeemed', etc., which were the difficult words or phrases that many of them found it hard to apprehend and translate as well.

After I had explained to them line by line the verbal meanings of the poem, and compared their translation versions with mine, for the first time, I asked them to create their own short poems with the same title following



the given patterns as shown in their textbook, or, if they liked, they could use their own patterns. They were also encouraged to look up the words in the dictionary and to search the Internet for any useful information about the background of the poet and the poem itself. So they did. When they presented me what they had created, I was greatly impressed.

Here are the selected ones written by three groups of the students:-

*Success*

*To win everyone's respect,  
To earn everyone's trust,  
To appreciate everyone's merit,  
To find a clear path to a vibrant life,  
To share happiness with people,  
To know that our life is full of meaning,  
To leave our world in perpetual peace.  
This is to have succeeded.*

*Success*

*Success looks like a flower blooming in  
spring,  
Success sounds like harmonies of children's*

*singing,*

*Success smells like rich honey, sweet and*

*satisfying,*

*Success tastes like bitter sweetness of*

*coffee,*

*Success feels like running a long marathon,*

*Success means working hard and not giving*

*up!*

*This is what success means to us.*

*Success*

*Sounds ambitious and*

*Unpredictable, but with your*

*Creativity and hard work, you*

*Can and will get there. With your*

*Effortful mind, it'll pay off*

*Someday you will really see it in your work*

*Success is for anyone who wants it!*

The first two poems follow the guidelines set by the underlined patterns but with different combinations of structures. As you can see, the first one shares more resemblance to the original poem by using the same verb patterns, but is different in noun endings. The second one shows the change of the infinitive verb patterns into patterns of perception verbs, thus emphasizing the perceptive effects of our five physical organs. What makes me feel pleased is the students' attempt to search for exact words and match them together, which shows that they know how to use good metaphors in writing poems with good imagination. The last one impresses me not only with its free and fluent style, but also with the

unexpected combination of first initials, which noticeably spells out the key word 'success'. Unbelievable, isn't it? Students' works make me realize that they can understand what 'success' means to a good extent indeed. And I have learned something new from them, too. And after the translating and writing exercises, I also required each of the students to recite the poem in class hoping that they could have a deeper impression of the poem verbally and emotionally.

Poem teaching has been regarded as a good and effective method for language teaching, not just for English, but for Chinese teaching as well. The typical rhythms and well-woven verses facilitate students' learning, making it easier especially for the young ones to utter, imitate and recite the poem. As the Chinese saying goes, 'Having recited the three hundred poems of the Tang Dynasty well, you can either imitate or elaborate them.' Let's try and see.

## Reference textbook

S.J. Alderson, C. Harris & H.S. Yuen (2012) *Developing Skills On Track (Level 1A)*, Aristo Educational Press Ltd., HK.

