

LESSONS

Bilingual Poetry and the Power of Voice

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GRADES 6–12

TYPE

POETRY

Self-power comes from many places. In this lesson, students will discover the power that comes from speaking and writing in multiple languages through poetry.

SESSION 1 : WHAT IS BILINGUAL LITERATURE?

YOU WILL NEED

- [Bilingual Poetry and the Power of Voice — Handout](#)
 - Page 1: for display
 - Page 2: 1 copy per student
- [“Americano”](#) by Jimmy Byrne
- [“Otters”](#) by Raymond Luczak
- [“Accents”](#) by Denice Frohman
- [What are the Top 20 Most Spoken Languages?](#) – Ethnologue (optional)

BEFORE YOU START

- This Lesson is designed to center the power and joy that comes from learning and speaking multiple languages. All students are welcome to participate, whether they speak one or many language(s).
- Students are encouraged to explore a new language or express themselves in the languages they already speak; however, writing in another language is optional. There are instructions available in Session 2 for students who choose

this path.

- Decide which two poems from the Materials list that you'd like to share during Step 2.
- This Lesson aligns with the following [CASEL Standards](#):
 - Self Awareness: Identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets
 - Self-Management: Using planning and organizational skills

HOW TO BEGIN

Begin by asking students to guess how many active, spoken languages around the world. (Spoiler alert: According to *Ethnologue*, an annual catalogue of the world's languages, there are an estimated [7,100 active languages](#)!) If time allows, navigate to [this page](#) that shares the top 20 most-spoken languages this year and click through to learn more about where each language is spoken.

Next, ask students to share a) the languages that they speak and then b) the languages they'd like to learn. All experience levels matter—only knowing a couple words, studying for years, or first languages. As students share, track their responses on the board in two different columns: languages currently spoken and languages to learn.

Editor's Note: Add your languages, too! Does anyone speak Klingon, Elvish, or Dothraki?

Educator Note: *You will return to students' responses to questions 2 and 3 below in Session 2. Be prepared to save their responses. We suggest taking a picture of the board so that it's easy to display later.*

Next, ask students to share thoughts on bilingual poetry:

1. What does it mean to be *bilingual*?
2. Why would a writer who *speaks* more than one language choose to *write* in more than one language?
3. Why might there be *power* in speaking and writing in more than one language?

Students will watch the two examples of bilingual poems that you chose—if time allows, watch all three! As students watch and listen to these poems, display page 1 of the [Bilingual Poetry and the Power of Voice — Handout](#). Ask them to consider the two questions listed there:

- How did these poems make you feel—how did it feel to experience these poems in two different languages?
- How do the two languages add to our understanding of the poem’s subject or the speaker?

After finishing the poems, ask students to turn and talk to a partner about the two questions. After two-three minutes of discussion, ask for volunteers from the pairs to share their answers.

Then, return to question 1 from the handout. Share with students that writers who are bilingual or multilingual have a variety of different reasons for writing in different languages. Many do it because they feel like using multiple languages best encompasses who they are—how they think, how they speak, or how they feel. There’s no right or wrong way to write in multiple languages.

Next, share with students that they will have the opportunity to write a poem that features two languages. If students already speak a second language, they will be encouraged to write in that language. If students don’t speak another language, then they will be encouraged to explore a language they’ve always wanted to learn. [students who already speak another language are welcome to choose this option, as well. If students do not want to add additional language to their poem, that is also an option.]

Educator Note: *This lesson is designed to introduce students to bilingual poetry and the unique power it holds for the writer and reader. All students should feel welcome to participate, whether they speak one or multiple language(s), and we encourage students to center their voice and interests in the writing process. For example:*

- *Students who speak more than one language may choose to explore another language to incorporate*

in their poem.

- *Students may also choose to write their poem in one language, if that choice feels authentic to their poem topic and voice.*

Pass out page 2 of the handout to give students time to do a quick brainstorm of potential poem topics. This is an open-ended prompt; however, the handout provides several categories of topics to get students started. There are also open slots for students to create their own prompt. We encourage students to write about what inspires them, so the options are endless!

Finally, ask students to take out their writing journals or a blank piece of paper and reflect on a question they're currently sitting with: it could be about the poems, any of the conversations they've had, etc.

SESSION 2 : ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND WRITING POEMS

YOU WILL NEED

- [Bilingual Poetry and the Power of Voice — Handout](#)
 - Page 3: 1 copy per student
- [“How Languages Die”](#) – PBS Storied (4:01-8:28)
- Every students' list of brainstorming topics from Session 1 (page 2 of the handout)
- Writing journals or lined paper

BEFORE YOU START

- Ensure you're able to share the students' answers to questions 2 and 3, from Session 1.

HOW TO BEGIN

To begin, write the phrase “endangered languages” on the board and ask students to share their thoughts on what they think it means.

If students did not call out this information already, share with them that an *endangered language* is one that is at risk of disappearing, due to there no longer being any speakers. Much like classifications of endangered animals, endangered languages can range from “Vulnerable” and “Dormant” all the way to “Extinct.”

- **Endangered Language: a language that is at risk of disappearing**

Watch the linked portion of “[How Languages Die](#)” from PBS *Storyed*. (4:01-8:28), to learn more about why languages disappear and what gets lost when they do. After watching the video, ask students to share their thoughts on the video:

- What was surprising?
- What is something they learned?

Then, display the answers to questions 2 and 3 that you saved from Session 1. Review the previous questions and the answers. Then, ask students to turn and talk to a partner about these same two questions—this time, in context with the information they learned about endangered languages. After 2-3 minutes of discussion, ask for volunteers to share what they talked about with their partner.

If students don’t call out this information, share with them that there is power in speaking and writing in more than one language because of what languages represent—people. Spoken and written language is how we are able to keep our collective understanding about the world alive. Through artistic modes of communication, like oral storytelling, music, writing and poetry, we can capture the real stories of the people who speak the language. When a language dies so much gets lost with it.

Next, guide students back to their list of potential topics from Session 1. Given the conversation about endangered languages, what other topics can they think of to add? Are there family stories they feel are important to document? Do they want to write about a mentor or a friend and the impact that person has on their life? Give students a few minutes to add to their list.

Pass out page 3 of the [Bilingual Poetry and the Power of Voice — Handout](#) so students can begin brainstorming the details of their poem. Encourage students to use specific details, like dialogue, setting descriptions, and sensory language. Remind students that, when it comes to adding an additional language into their poem, they have three options:

1. If you speak an additional language, you can write in that language.
2. If you don't speak another language, you can explore a new language you've always wanted to learn or explore two distinct "voices" you use within that language (e.g. your voice among your soccer team vs. your voice with your grandparents).
3. If you don't want to add an additional language, you can leave your poem as is.

Once students have finished brainstorming, they can begin writing their poem in their writing journals. If students are writing in a language they already speak, they can either write their drafts in both languages, switching languages when they feel it's appropriate—or, they may write their draft in the language they feel most comfortable with and then choose the words and phrases they'd like to translate during the revision stage.

To wrap up today's session, ask students to turn and talk to a partner about their poem: What are they excited about? What are they still thinking about?

SESSION 3 : REVISING AND UNDERSTANDING TRANSLATION

In this session, students will read mentor texts, written by other students, to learn more about incorporating another language in their writing.

YOU WILL NEED

- [Bilingual Poetry and the Power of Voice — Handout](#)
 - Pages 4-5: for display
 - Pages 6-7: 1 copy per student
 - Page 8: At least 2 copies per student, plus a few extras
- Devices for students to access language translation websites

HOW TO BEGIN

To begin, ask for volunteers to share what’s been coming up for them over the course of the lesson:

- What is one thing you’ve learned so far?
- What is one thing you’re currently thinking about?

After 2-3 minutes, ask for volunteers to share.

Next, share with students that they will add their second language into the poem today, during the revision phase. To give them examples of how this could be done, display the mentor texts on pages 4-5 of the [Bilingual Poetry and the Power of Voice — Handout](#) and ask for volunteers to read each poem out loud. After both poems have been read, ask students to share their thoughts on the way the writers used two languages:

- What did you notice about the way both poems used two languages? What might you want to try in your poem?

***Educator Note:** Students will finish these steps at different paces, depending on the option they chose. If you have students who chose not to add a second language, we suggest that they act as a peer editor for students still in the revision phase—just get the rest of the students’ OK, first!*

For most of the remaining time, students will work on revising their poems, with a focus on adding their second language. First, pass out page 6 of the handout and give students the opportunity to select parts of their poem to translate and to briefly reflect on why they chose those words or phrases.

- **For students who already speak another language:** Suggest writing new lines in that language, to enhance their poem’s original meaning, or consider writing the whole poem in their second language.
- **For students who don’t already speak a second language:** Suggest they choose a language they’ve always wanted to learn and translate individual vocabulary words (nouns). Share with students who choose this option that the reason they are only translating nouns is because language is a complex system of meaning and context. All languages use *idioms* or phrases with meanings that can only be learned through usage, and without previous studying of that language it is difficult to identify those phrases. We never want to accidentally simplify another language through the act of translation.
- **For students who chose not to add an additional language:** Pass out page 7 of the handout so they can begin the revision phase.

After students have completed page 6 of the handout, provide them with page 7 so that they can go through the revision phase. After students have revised, they can rewrite the final version of their poem on pages 8 and 9.

***Conclusion:** To conclude, invite volunteers to read their poems and to share more about their translations, if they made any. After all volunteers have shared, ask students to share about what it was*

like to learn about writing in multiple languages. Would students who already knew a second language write another piece with it; do students who explored a new language plan to continue studying it?