“The One Who Carries the Light Bulb”: Poetry as a Content-Based Strategy for Supporting English Language Learners in Toronto Elementary Schools

By

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A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Teaching

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Abstract

“Everybody has their own idea of what’s a poet. Robert Frost, President Johnson, T.S. Eliot, Rudolf Valentino - they’re all poets. I like to think of myself as the one who carries the light bulb.”

Bob Dylan

Contrary to popular belief, research has shown that a wide vocabulary of English words, a well-developed knowledge of English grammar and syntax, and the ability to read and write English prose at a high level are not prerequisites for emerging bilingual students to be able to succeed at reading, writing, and analysing poetry in English. This study examines the data from interviews with two Toronto teachers who have incorporated poetry and music into their teaching practice in ways that are helping the ELLs in their classes bridge the gap between their content knowledge in their L1s and their developing proficiency in English as a second language. The study examined student and teacher identities and attitudes toward poetry and found that students are often more likely to be comfortable engaging with poetry activities in the classroom when these activities are tied to their cultural and linguistic identities in engaging and meaningful ways.

Key Words: ELL, poetry, culturally relevant pedagogy
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and thank the many people who have helped and supported me throughout the completion of this research project. I would first of all like to thank Professor Rose Fine-Meyer and her teaching assistants Gurpreet Sahmbi and Jason Brennan for all of their constructive feedback and assistance as I worked to complete this project. I would also like to thank my research participants for taking the time to meet with me and share their teaching experiences. Your stories, guidance, and advice were invaluable to me as a beginning teacher, and your dedication to teaching the arts helped me deepen my commitment to finding ways to incorporate music and poetry into my own practice. Finally, I would like to thank my peers from cohort J/I 232 for their support and encouragement over the last two years. I feel incredibly privileged to have been a part of such a wonderful community of teacher candidates during my time at OISE.
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction to the Research Study

With over one hundred and forty languages spoken across the GTA, Toronto is often referred to as one of the most multilingual cities in the world (Toronto Facts, City of Toronto, 2006, p.1). As such, schools in the GTA also have some of the “most multilingual student populations in the world” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). According to a document issued by People for Education entitled “Language Support,” “Ontario has a higher proportion of English as a Second Language (ESL) students in its public education system than any other province, and nearly three quarters of those students attend school in the Greater Toronto Area” (2013). Because the percentage of emerging bilingual students (or ELLs) attending publicly funded Elementary schools across the GTA is the highest it has ever been (ibid), it is now more important than ever that all teachers have ready access to the tools and resources they need in order to be able to provide the kinds of supports that will allow their students learning English to grow and flourish as language and literacy learners.

In her book Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning, Pauline Gibbons writes that “second-language learners do not in any case have the time to study English as a ‘subject’ before they use it to learn other things; they must begin to use it as a medium for learning as soon as they enter school, simultaneously developing their second language hand-in-hand with curriculum knowledge” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 25). Similarly, in their curriculum document entitled Supporting English Language Learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators Grades 1-8, the Ontario Ministry of Education recommends “using subject content as a vehicle for language instruction” in their list of concrete language teaching strategies, adding that it is important to “provide students with opportunities to acquire language in a context that is interesting and relevant to encourage and enhance language learning” (Kasper, L.F., 2008, p. 60).
According to a substantial body of research, which I explore more at length in the literature review in the second chapter of this paper, teaching poetry has been shown to be an effective way for teachers to help create the kinds of “interesting” and “relevant” contexts for learning in their classrooms that so many researchers agree is crucial to supporting students’ second language acquisition (ibid). In Laurie Zucker-Conde’s study Bridging Worlds: Advocacy Stigma and the Challenge of Teaching Writing to Secondary ELL Students, for example, grade nine English teacher Jennifer Tamara stresses “the importance of poetry” in her own classroom “as both a means to inspire authentic writing and more sophisticated understanding of literary themes and genres” (Zucker-Conde, 2009, p. 124). In my literature review, I discuss similar research concerning the many highly engaging and beneficial ways to use poetry to help Elementary aged English language learners develop their oral communication, intensive reading, and written English skills.

Poetry has been shown to be a powerful tool for supporting language acquisition while also fostering student engagement with subject matter. This is partly because, as David I. Hanauer observes in his paper “Meaningful Literacy: Writing poetry in the language classroom,” the writing, sharing, and discussing of poetry in the classroom provides students with valuable opportunities for “learn[ing] about themselves” – and class material always becomes more engaging for students when it has personal significance (Hanauer, 2012, p. 114). For this reason, most would agree that poetry can be a valuable resource for supporting emerging bilingual students in the language arts classroom. Unfortunately, however, the majority of ESL educators in Ontario do not currently report incorporating any poetry into their language lessons. In their study “Teaching Practices of ESL Teachers in Ontario,” Richard Baltus and Hassan Belhiah found that only one out of the fourteen Ontario ESL teachers who participated in the study
identified poetry as one of the “teaching methods and activities” that they used with their students (Baltus and Belhiah, 2013 p. 97). Although Baltus and Belhiah conducted their study on a small scale, I argue that the teachers they interviewed represented an adequately diverse sample, since they taught in various regions across Ontario and since their years of experience in the classroom ranged from five to twenty-eight. The problem, therefore, that my study seeks to explore and begin to address is that poetry-centred lessons and activities – which have been shown to be effective in supporting both language acquisition and student engagement and participation – are too often de-emphasized in Ontario language arts programs in favour of “safer” but, often, less effective options for instruction and assessment (Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2013, Ch. 16).

One potential reason for this lack of focus on poetry-based activities in Ontario’s (including Toronto’s) language arts classrooms is that some teachers feel “uncomfortable” or “lack confidence” when it comes to incorporating poetry into their language lessons (Nieuwenhuis, 2009, p. 2). There is also the view among some educators that “since even many native speakers experience difficulty when reading poems,” it is “impractical” to “use… poetry with English language learners,” since poetry tends to convey meaning in more abstract terms than other forms of writing (David I. Hanauer, Dyanne Rivers 2004). Most of the recent research in the field, however, does not support this idea. In fact, many studies have found that the opposite is true, and that reading and writing poetry have actually been shown to help “support the language learning process” (ibid). For example, according to a 2001 study conducted by Nancy Hadaway, Sylvia Vardell and Terrell Young, “the brevity and conciseness of poetry provide helpful scaffolding to longer texts as well as practice with meaningful content”
for emerging bilingual students, “thereby encouraging increased output and potential for growth” (Hadaway, Vardell, and Young, 2001, Ch. 16).

1.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover and share some effective strategies for teaching poetry to emerging bilingual students by learning from ESL educators who are already successfully incorporating poetry in their own language programs in Toronto Elementary schools, or who have done so in the past. The study seeks to address the problem of the perceived impracticality of using poetry with English language learners by producing a short, easy-to-use resource for teachers who wish to use poetry as a tool for helping their students develop fluency in English in a context that is both engaging and meaningful. This study also seeks to understand and address some of the additional challenges and opportunities that Toronto teachers with high numbers of ELLs in their classes encounter when it comes to incorporating poetry into their language lessons.

1.2 Research Questions

The main question driving my research is: how are a small sample of educators who have worked, or who currently work, in Elementary schools in the Toronto District School Board designing language arts lessons for English language learners that use poetry in interesting and relevant ways? Some related subsidiary questions to help give greater focus to my research include:

- Why do these teachers believe that it is important to teach poetry?
- What are some of the common features of the most effective poetry-centred lessons that these teachers have taught in their ESL language arts programs?
- What do these teachers perceive to be the learning outcomes of their poetry-centred lessons, in terms of helping students develop fluency in written and spoken English in an academic setting?
- As far as these teachers have been able to interpret, what kind of impacts have their poetry-centred lessons had on student engagement and participation in class?
- How do these teachers seek to make their poetry lessons culturally relevant/responsive?
- What are some of the challenges these teachers face when planning, teaching or assessing poetry-centred lessons and how do they address them?
- How do these teachers design their poetry-centred lessons? What factors do they take into consideration when planning these lessons? What aspects of reading and writing poetry and which genres of poetry do their students seem to enjoy the most?

1.3 Background of the Researcher

As someone with a literature background, I recognize that poetry has the potential to engage and inspire learners. I also recognize, however, that poetry has not always been, and still is not always taught in the most accessible or culturally responsive ways in most classrooms, and that, as a result, various groups of students have often been made to experience barriers to discovering the joys of reading and expressing themselves through poetry. Although poetry is potentially a wonderful resource for all teachers who seek to support their students’ development as literacy learners, it is often given less focus in language arts classes than other forms of creative writing like the “narrative,” the essay, and the “diary” entry (Dymoke, 2003, p.xiii). This is especially true in language arts classes with high numbers of English language learners (Dymoke, 2003).

I am interested in exploring this topic further because I believe that it is important that, given the high percentage of emerging bilingual students currently enrolled in Toronto
Elementary schools, teachers in the TDSB are made aware of the usefulness of poetry as a tool for bridging the gap between their ELL students’ content knowledge and English language proficiency. I also believe that in order teach poetry effectively to the emerging bilingual students in their classes, teachers who may be uncomfortable teaching poetry must be made aware of the many resources available to assist them.

The experiences of completing my first practicum in a school with a high number of English language learners and tutoring several students whose L1s are languages other than English have taught me that fluency in English is not a prerequisite for being able to read and write poetry. On the contrary, I have learned that reading and writing poetry can in fact help motivate students develop fluency in English because it is a medium that allows students with high content knowledge but low or intermediate English language proficiency to express complex thoughts using relatively few and relatively simple words. When poetry is made more accessible to English language learners (i.e. when it is personally meaningful, culturally relevant, and compelling to read), it can be a wonderful starting point for talking about any number of language arts topics, from symbolism to sentence structure. I hope that in some small way this study can help teachers who wish to give poetry a greater focus in their language programs develop interesting and engaging poetry-based lessons for their students. I also hope that it will provide me with some insight into my own practice when it comes to reading, writing, discussing and sharing poetry with my students.

1.4 Overview

This research project is divided into five chapters. In my next chapter, I review the literature in the area of using poetry as a tool for supporting English language acquisition and encouraging oral communication and class participation for students learning English. In chapter
three, I describe my research methodology, including information about the participants, the data collection, and the limitations of the study. In chapter four I report and discuss my research findings (i.e. my interviews with educators in Toronto schools in areas with high populations of English language learners). Finally, in chapter five, I review the implications of my findings and make recommendations for future directions. At the end of the study, I include references and a list of appendices.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter I review the literature in the areas of poetry and language learning, focussing specifically on ways for teachers to use poetry as an effective and highly engaging tool for helping students develop their oral language skills and encouraging reading for meaning. I start by reviewing the literature on the usefulness of poetry in ESL language arts programs insofar as lessons and exercises in poetry have the potential to help students achieve the two desirable learning outcomes stated above. Next, I consider research on the challenges and corresponding opportunities involved in using poetry in ESL language arts programs, focussing particularly on issues associated with teacher attitudes and teacher perception concerning using poetry with emerging bilingual students. Finally, I identify some of what is still not known in these areas and formulate questions requiring further research.

2.1 Poetry and Oral Fluency

Research shows that providing opportunities for meaningful and collaborative poetry-centred activities in the language arts classroom can be an engaging and fun way to help emerging bilinguals improve their oral communication skills and encourage reading for meaning in English. In their qualitative study, Hadaway, Vardell, and Young draw on their “own experiences teaching English chorally in ESL… classrooms and working with teachers in sharing poetry across the curriculum” to argue that “poetry is a particularly unintimidating and fun way” for ELLs to get the “practice developing the… oral fluency” that they need in order to thrive in primarily English-speaking environments, such as Elementary schools where English is the primary language of instruction (Hadaway, Vardell and Young, 2001, p. 796).
This study was conducted in response to what the researchers perceived to be the problem that most oral language learning in ESL settings tended to centre on “more basic communication and survival skills” while “more academically oriented language lessons” in schools tended to privilege “reading and writing” over oral communication (Hadaway, Vardell and Young, 2001, p. 797). Hadaway, Vardell and Young claim that this unfortunate trend has led to “missed opportunities” for English language learners to develop their oral communication skills in academic settings (ibid). Their study provides an account of a number of creative ways to teach poetry that they found to be particularly effective with the primary students learning English in their own classes, such as “call and response,” “choral readings,” and “singing poems” (Hadaway, Vardell and Young, 2001, p. 801). Hadaway, Vardell and Young conclude that poetry is a “unique[ly] appropriate… vehicle for providing practice and pleasure in oral language skill development” because it provides students with a “relaxed and pleasant” way to practice speaking English in the classroom (Hadaway, Vardell and Young, 2001, p. 796).

Similarly, in her article “Communicating through Poetry in an ESL Classroom,” Mary Starz explores “the use of poetry in the second language class” as “a means of gentle, non-threatening communication” (Starz, 1995, p. 3). She cites “techniques for using poetry to teach intonation, using adjectives, verbs, pronunciation, and syntax,” and advocates for using poetry as a vehicle to “express… feelings” in a low-stakes academic setting (ibid). Like Hadaway, Vardell and Young, Starz is concerned that an overemphasis in some classrooms on “correct punctuation” and “structure” when it comes to writing and participating in class discussions creates a climate of fear that effectively shuts down learning (ibid). She writes that “poetry” has been useful in her own classrooms as a way of engaging those “students who cannot express their feelings [in class] because they worry about correct [sentence] structure and fear of
rejection” (ibid). The fact that safe and welcoming classrooms have the added benefit of positively impacting student learning is just one more reason that teachers always need to be working to provide students, especially students in the process of learning English, with “nonthreatening way[s] to participate orally” in class activities (ibid). This is where poetry-based lessons can serve a useful purpose in classrooms with high numbers of emerging bilingual students.

More recent studies have reported similar findings. In a 2015 study, “When It Rains a Puddle Is Made: Fostering Academic Literacy in English Learners through Poetry and Translation,” the researchers found that the use of a newly developed language arts resource called “Poetry Inside Out,” which provides students with opportunities for reading poetry aloud and translating poems from their original languages (which were also the students’ L1s) to English, with an emphasis on “flow” and “connect[ing] the poem[s] to the author[s’] purpose[s],” encouraged students to “cultivat[e] the academic and poetic voices that [they] already ha[d], but [we]re hesitant to use in the classroom” (Park, Jie Y, Lori Simpson, Jesse Bicknell, and Sarah Michaels, 2015, p. 57). Additionally, in his paper entitled “For Better of Verse – Poetry in the ESL Classroom” teacher-researcher Frederick Schroeder observes that using poetry in his own language arts lessons helped “creat[e] a sense of community” in his classroom, where students, regardless of their level of fluency in English, felt comfortable expressing and discussing their ideas with one another (Schroeder, 2010, p. 11).

It is clear that both these more recent studies that focus on using poetry as a means of developing students’ oral fluency as well as older, more foundational texts in this area of research are concerned with the problem of a lack of opportunities for emerging bilingual students to develop their “academically oriented oral language” skills in the language classroom.
But although there are many studies which demonstrate that a greater emphasis on teaching poetry in the ESL classroom presents a compelling and potentially very effective solution to this problem, poetry continues to take a back seat in many language classes to other literary forms and instructional strategies such as the novel, the essay, and the persuasive paragraph. Moreover, even when students are given a significant number of opportunities to practice their oral communication skills in class, they are usually asked to do so through participating in high stakes, competitive activities like debating and speech-giving, which are often more “intimidating” and less “fun” than poetry-based forms oral language instruction (ibid).

2.2 Poetry and Reading for Meaning

Teaching poetry has also been shown to help students develop their “intensive reading” skills (i.e. reading for depth of understanding), while other forms of writing like the novel and the essay lend themselves more easily to “extensive reading” (reading for breadth of understanding) (Schnorr, 2011, p. 36). In her article “ESL Curriculum Revision: Shifting Paradigms for Success,” Doreen E. Ewart argues that, while both kinds of reading are extremely important in terms of developing fluency in any language, “a curriculum which integrates reading and writing actively around meaning-making tasks with texts and focuses on fluency before accuracy is preferable to a skill-based curriculum” (Ewart, 2011, p. 5). This is because intensive reading activities provide more opportunities for students to engage with subject matter and discover the ways in which they find it “personally relevant” and meaningful (Kasper, L.F., 2000, p. 108). This in turn helps students become more “invested in” the “learning experience” (ibid) since “students learn best when they can identify themselves and their own experience in
the material they read and study at school” (Supporting English Language Learners: A practical guide for Ontario educators Grades 1-8, 2006, p. 55).

Valerie F. Kinloch builds on this idea in her article “Poetry, Literacy and Creativity: Fostering Effective Learning Strategies in an Urban Classroom,” in which she draws on her own experiences teaching poetry to middle school students to argue that reading, writing, reciting, and performing poetry are all inherently “political” activities (Kinloch, 2005, p. 96). Kinloch asserts that poems, as political texts, provide rich grounds for authentic and meaningful discussion that serves to “heighten [students’] speaking, writing, and literacy skills” (Kinloch, 2005, p. 98-99). “To participate in… classroom exchanges in which students express their feelings and ideas through oral and written mediums… where multiple competing and complex discourses are discussed and negotiated in humane spaces for interaction,” Kinloch writes, “requires people to talk across, by talking with and through, differences in the production of both extended meanings and written texts” (Kinloch, 2005, p. 99).

Exercises in poetry translation can also be useful in helping students develop their intensive reading skills of English texts, as Park, Simpson, Bicknell and Michaels argue in their qualitative study mentioned in section 2.2 of this chapter. In one interview cited in this study, an ESL educator shares how asking her emerging bilingual students to translate poems from their L1s into English encouraged them to read for meaning: “in its complexity and openness, poetry offers multiple points of entry for meaning, connection, and imagination…. Students understood that they have to first construct the poem’s meaning, which serves as a context or frame of reference for the translation” (Park, Jie Y., Simpson, Bicknell, and Michaels, 2015, p. 55).

Furthermore, as Bruce Jones points out in his article “Motivating and Supporting English Language Learners with the Poems of William Carlos Williams,” because poems tend to be short
in length, they usually provide more accessible points of entry to complex literary ideas for students learning English than, say, novels or short stories at the same reading level (Jones, 2010).

2.3 The Gap Between Theory and Practice: Opportunities and Challenges for Teachers in Incorporating Poetry into ESL Language Arts Programs

Although there are many other useful content-based strategies for helping students develop fluency in reading, writing, and oral communication in English, poetry has been shown to be especially effective when it comes to teaching students to synthesize texts (i.e. read intensively) and communicate orally in the classroom. Yet poetry continues to be viewed by many educators as an impractical mode of instruction due to a number of factors (Hanauer, 2004). The three main factors that the research points to are 1) the belief among some teachers that most poetry is too challenging for English language learners, since even many L1 learners [i.e. students whose first language, in this case English, is also the language of instruction] experience difficulty when it comes to reading and understanding poems (ibid), 2) the fact that poetry is perceived by many teachers (who may have had negative experiences with poetry themselves when they were in school) as being boring or culturally irrelevant at best and exclusionary at worst, and, finally, 3) the fact that poetry is seen as being too difficult, or “risk[y]” to assess, because teachers do not feel they have “sufficient certainty about what [is] required” (Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2013, p. 99).

The first of these three factors contributing to the perceived impracticality of using poetry with ELLs – the idea that poetry is too challenging for ELLs to understand, let alone write, recite, and discuss – is the easiest to address, since much of the research in the area of using poetry as a tool for supporting language acquisition shows that this idea is based on a
misconception about the way students learn new languages. Poetry, as demonstrated in the research cited above, naturally lends itself to learning activities geared toward supporting English language learners in developing their oral fluency and reading comprehension skills. This does not mean, however, that teachers do not need to worry about finding ways to make poetry more accessible to the English language learners in their classes.

One way teachers can accomplish this goal is by strategically choosing poems that appeal to the broad range of abilities and interests that exist in their classrooms. In his study cited above, Jones writes that poetry is a “useful tool for helping [ELLs] learn to decode the meaning and syntax of English vocabulary” because it “offers a compact and highly expressive alternative to traditional prose and lengthy written texts” (Jones, 2010, p. 16). Jones asserts that the best poems to use with English language learners are, like the poems of William Carolos Williams, both high interest and “simplified” in terms of their “structure, grammar and word choice” (ibid).

Other strategies for making poetry more interesting and more accessible for emerging bilingual students with a variety of different learning styles, interests, and talents include reading poetry aloud as a class, incorporating “dramatization and improvisation” into poetry performance (Gasparro, 1994, p. 1), teaching “singing poems,” (Hadaway, Vardell and Young, 2001, p. 798) and giving students ample time to read new poems independently or in groups before beginning to study them as a class (ibid).

Another factor that emerges in the research as contributing to the lack of emphasis on poetry in language programs both in Ontario and elsewhere is that many teachers “lack confidence” or feel “uncomfortable” teaching poetry to their students because they “don’t find poetry interesting and meaningful themselves” (Nieuwenhuis, 2009, p. 2). This may be partly due to the fact that the majority of teachers have had very little exposure to poetry in their own
experiences as elementary and high school students. In their study “Wiki-ed Poetry: Transforming Preservice Teachers’ Preconceptions About Poetry and Poetry Teaching,” Janette Hughes and Sue Dymoke report that in a survey of approximately fifty-six preservice English teachers in the United Kingdom, “some could not remember any kind of poetry study in elementary or high school,” and “others share[d] stories of negative experiences with poetry, in particular memories of having to ‘dissect’ poetry line by line” (Hughes and Dymoke, 2011, p. 1).

Furthermore, if teachers do report being exposed to poetry in their elementary and high school years, they often remember studying primarily Western canonical texts, usually written by “white, male authors,” which do not offer the same range of experiences and themes for students to connect with on a personal level (Land, 2007, p. 68). Faced with classes full of students from vastly diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is no wonder that some teachers might feel that there are much better, more inclusive, and more effective content-based strategies for supporting student learning and language acquisition than teaching poetry.

In their study “In search of the knowledge base in language teaching: explanations from experienced teachers,” B. Johnston and K. Goettsch argue that making poetry accessible to all students must involve a “new pedagogical commitment beyond just adding a text or two by minority or non-Western writers” (Johnston and Goettsch, 2000, p. 467). Reaching this goal, they assert, will require “us [teachers] to be advocates for change our classrooms, with new text selection as an important first part of the process” (ibid). Unfortunately, despite claiming that teachers need to do more than just select culturally relevant texts in order to become effective “advocates for change” in their classrooms, Johnston and Goettsch do not offer any concrete suggestions for further actions teachers might take in order to develop more authentically multicultural approaches to teaching poetry. Simply telling teachers that they need to ‘do more’
does little to help affect the kind of deep systemic change that Johnston and Goettsch’s study argues is needed in order to make poetry teaching a more inclusive and culturally responsive form of instruction.

Land notes that part of the problem with the way poetry is currently being taught in schools stems from a lack of teacher training and support. While some teachers, Land writes, are admittedly “unaware of the power structures at play in the teaching of canonical Western texts by (usually) white, male authors,” most teachers “recognize” the “shortcomings” of this approach to teaching poetry and “would like to do more,” but are deterred from doing so by the fact that “implementation, support and teacher training” in the area of developing culturally responsive approaches to poetry teaching “have been painfully slow in coming” (Land, 2007, p. 70). Indeed, while Park and her colleagues’ bilingual, translation-based approach and Kinloch’s political lens provide good starting points for teachers of intermediate grades to support language acquisition and student engagement through poetry, it seems that many of the approaches geared toward junior and primary aged ELLs outlined by researchers like Hadaway and Starz, such as “singing poems” and “choral readings,” boil down to what Johnston and Goettsch characterize as the band-aid solution of “new text selection” (2000).

Finally, teachers face significant barriers to incorporating poetry into their ESL language arts programs when it comes to assessing students’ poetry. According to Lambirth, Smith and Steele, part of the reason for the lack of focus on poetry in so many language classes both in Canada and elsewhere is that a great number of teachers find poetry an extremely difficult for of writing to assess (Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2013). Lambirth and his colleagues found that most of the teachers who participated in their study cited a “lack of marked… exemplars” for assessing poetry as their primary reason for privileging “prose texts” – which these teachers
viewed as “safer” options for assessment – over poetry in their language arts programs (Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2013, p. 91).

According to much of the research in this area, a partial solution to the problem of difficulty with assessing students’ poetry can be achieved by providing more training, resources, and support for teachers. In their study “Making Use of Poems to Teach English,” Ugur Recep Cetinavci and Birsen Tutunis found that offering a free “Poetry Analysis and Training” course to new teachers resulted in these teachers “favour[ing] poetry more strongly as a multi-purpose and multi-functional tool to teach a foreign language” (Cetinavci and Tutunis, 1985, p. 75). Since the goal of assessment is to support student learning, it is important that teachers are comfortable enough with poetry not only to be able to teach an effective lesson on it, but also to be able to give constructive feedback on their students’ poems. It makes sense then that providing teachers with the opportunity to take a poetry analysis and training course would increase their overall comfort level in terms both teaching and assessing poetry in their language arts classes.

Furthermore, in her book Drafting and Assessing Poetry: A Guide for Teachers, Sue Dymoke points out that while of course “if practitioners lack confidence in teaching the writing of poetry” they will “inevitabl[y]… remain uncertain about its assessment,” teacher “attitudes” and biases towards poetry as a mode of instruction also play a part in contributing to the “perceived difficulties with poetry assessment” (Dymoke, 2003, p. 147). Particularly, Dymoke writes, the commonly reported teacher attitude of “‘if poetry is creative and individual then who am I to assess it?’” contributes to what she calls the “mystique surrounding the genre [of poetry],” which, she argues, needs to be removed in order to “establish [poetry] on equal footing” (in terms of assessibility) with equally “creative and individual” “prose types” like the “diary entry,” the “narrative,” and the “letter” (Dymoke, 2003, p. xiii).
Dymoke argues that students and teachers should have more “regular opportunities” to read, write, and assess poetry, because she believes that this will increase their comfort levels with poetry and lead to both better quality writing from students and more effective assessment from teachers (Dymoke, 2003, p. 28). Providing teachers with resources and training in the areas of teaching and assessing poetry is therefore extremely important, since a good understanding of the mechanics of poetry and how to teach it leads to an improved ability to assess poetry in ways that support students’ continued growth and success as writers and language learners.

2.4 Questions Requiring Further Research

Based on the findings cited in this literature review, I have identified three main questions that I believe require further research, and which inform the questions I ask my participants in chapter four of this study. First, of all the many strategies that teachers can and do use to help make poetry more engaging and accessible for their emerging bilingual students, which methods have teachers in Toronto found to be the most effective, practical, and easy to implement in the classroom? Second, aside from choosing new/more diverse texts, how can teachers of English language learners in Toronto Elementary schools make their poetry-centred lessons more culturally relevant and responsive? Finally, what are some of the concrete methods and resources that teachers, specifically teachers in Toronto, have found to be helpful with what many find to be the difficult and “uncertain” task of assessing student poetry (ibid)?

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

In this literature review I examine the research related to the many benefits and challenges associated with using poetry as a mode of instruction with emerging bilingual students in Elementary and Middle schools. This review emphasizes the extent to which the
current research in the field has explored poetry as an effective and potentially highly engaging tool for helping students develop their oral communication and intensive reading skills in English. It also outlines some of the questions that have been raised by both researchers and teachers about how to cope with the challenge of assessing students’ poetry and how to make poetry lessons more accessible and culturally relevant for all students. With reference to the questions stated above (in section 2.5 of this chapter), I hope to arrive at a better understanding of how these challenges can and are being met by teachers in Toronto District School Board in order to provide their students with opportunities for developing their reading, writing and oral communication skills in English along with a lifelong love of poetry.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction to the Chapter

In this chapter I explain the research methodology of this study and provide a rationale for the methodological decisions I have made while conducting my research. I begin by outlining my research approach and procedures and describing how I have collected my data. Next, I provide information about the participants in the study, including information about sampling criteria and recruitment procedures, as well as brief biographies of the participants. I then go on to describe how I plan to analyse my data and address some of the ethical considerations of my project. Lastly, I review some of the limitations and strengths of the methodological approach used in this study.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research project is conducted using a qualitative approach, beginning with a review of the literature outlining some of the current points of discussion among researchers in the field surrounding the use of poetry as a strategy for engaging and supporting emergent bilingual students in Elementary schools, and concluding with the conduction of two semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with teachers who have worked or currently work in Elementary schools in the Toronto District School Board with high populations of English language learners.

In his article “The role of qualitative approaches to research in CALL contexts: closing in on the learner’s experience,” Mike Levy discusses “the role of qualitative approaches… as a domain for research study with particular attributes that require a qualitative orientation” (Levy, 2015, p. 554). Since this research is guided by qualitative questions like why teachers feel that incorporating poetry-based activities into their lessons is difficult and how they have been able to successfully address the associated challenges in their own classrooms – as opposed to, for
example, what the systemic issues leading to the marginalization of poetry in ESL programming are, which would be more properly addressed by a qualitative research approach – it is appropriate to use a qualitative approach for this study.

In their paper “Methods of Data Collection in qualitative research: interviews and focus groups,” Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick state that “semi-structured interviews consist of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail” (Gill et al, 2008, p.191). This study also uses semi-structured interviews as a means of gathering information and advice from the participants because the researcher, as a beginning teacher, does not have as much classroom experience as the research participants, and wishes to leave room for participants to explore topics or issues related to teaching poetry with ELLs that the researcher may not have anticipated or previously considered.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The three primary instruments of data collection used in this study are 1) other qualitative and quantitative studies addressing the teaching of poetry in the ESL classroom, 2) face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with educators who are currently or have in the past taught in Toronto Elementary schools in areas with large populations of English language learners, and 3) the researcher’s own observations – based on experiences teaching ELLs both as a teacher candidate and as a tutor – about the usefulness of poetry as a strategy for teaching and engaging emerging bilingual learners in the Elementary school classroom.

In the literature review in chapter two of this study, both qualitative and quantitative studies that speak to the same issues that this study seeks to address – such as why it is important to teach poetry (and especially why poetry is beneficial for English language learners), how
poetry has been shown help children with language acquisition, the impacts of poetry-based instruction on student engagement and academic progress, and the benefits and challenges for teachers associated with incorporating poetry into their lessons – were used.

Chapter four of this study reports on the findings of the two semi-structured interviews with educators in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who are currently using or have in the past used poetry with their ELL students to help with English language acquisition. The strategies and advice shared by these two research participants may be useful for both beginning teachers and experienced teachers in schools where English is the primary language of instruction who are looking for new ways to use poetry as part of their language programs.

Finally, the researcher’s own experiences teaching poetry in classrooms with high numbers of emergent bilingual students will, both directly and indirectly, inform the research findings reported in chapter four of this study.

3.3 Participants: Sampling Criteria, Recruitment Procedures, and Participant Biographies

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

The participants interviewed for this study will be teachers who have considerable experience teaching in Elementary schools with high numbers of English language learners across the GTA. The participants are educators who are teaching or have taught in schools with high populations of English language learners in the Toronto District School Board. The reason for this is that the strategies these participants share (as opposed to strategies shared by teachers with limited experience working with ELLs) are more likely to be broadly applicable if they have been tried and tested with large groups of emergent bilingual students over a number of years.
3.3.2 Participant recruitment

This study uses stratified sampling, based on the criteria listed above (i.e. ESL teachers using poetry in schools with a high population of English language learners) in order to select the sample group. From there, convenience sampling is used in order to select the two research participants. Although in quantitative studies convenience sampling is generally not recommended because it can lead to inaccurate data, due to the qualitative nature of this research project, and due to the fact that it is partly based on the researcher’s own observations and experiences teaching poetry to emerging bilingual students, the researcher believes that the choice to use convenience sampling when selecting the two research participants (i.e. choosing the first ESL educators that meet the previously listed criteria that the researcher encounters through her work in the education field) is justified.

The researcher conducted interviews of two participants who have used poetry with their ELL students in various ways over the years in order to collect the data needed for this study. In the following brief participant biographies, both participants’ names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

3.3.3 Participant biographies

*Participant #1 (Joni):* Joni began her career in education working in various schools across the TDSB as a classroom Music Specialist. She now consults and teaches for a number of educational institutions, teacher groups, and arts providers throughout North America. She also oversees a number of community engagement programs that seek to provide free musical education to underserved youth. Joni is interested in exploring the connections between “poetry
and text” and in exploring the development of musical literacy through her work with the newly arrived Canadian students who participate in the after school programs she directs.

Participant #2 (Laura): Laura is a grade seven/eight teacher with eleven years of classroom experience in the TDSB. She currently teaches at a school with a large population of English language learners, particularly Filipino students newly arrived to Canada who speak primarily Tagalog at home. Laura has an academic background in music, theatre, and creative writing. She studied creative writing at York University, has published numerous short stories, and authored a play that was featured in the Toronto Fringe Festival in the summer of 2014. She also writes a weekly blog in which she discusses her literary influences and keeps readers updated on her current writing and education related projects.

3.4 Data Analysis

Part of the analysis of the data collected in this project will occur simultaneously with the collection of the data, as the researcher begins to work through and develop a deeper understanding of the questions her research seeks to address and as she begins to carve out her own contribution to the conversation among researchers in the field surrounding issues related to the challenges and benefits of using poetry in ESL language arts programs.

The analysis of the data will also occur partly after the data collection has been completed, as the researcher synthesizes and reflects upon the information gathered both through secondary research and through interviews with the two research participants.

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

Although this is a qualitative study with a small number of participants, and although the aim of this study is help both teachers and students to discover and share ways of making poetry
more accessible to English language learners, there are always ethical issues to consider when doing any form of research. In this study, there are three main ethical considerations that inform the interview approach and the approach taken when it comes to sharing the research findings in the format of this written report.

The first issue is that the researcher must be honest and transparent in interviews with participants regarding the purpose of this qualitative study and how the researcher plans to share the information gathered over the course of the study with the public. This consideration has been addressed by fully informing both participants of the aims of the study, the findings as of the dates of the interviews, and what the researcher hopes to achieve through the completion of the study, as well as how the researcher plans to share the findings of the study.

The second issue is that the participants must feel comfortable and safe sharing information throughout the interview process – including the process leading up to the interview. This means that the researcher must consider how to reach out to potential participants in such a way that they feel comfortable declining to participate and that the researcher must consider the degree to which the tone and structure of the interviews themselves are friendly, supportive, and open. This concern has been addressed by letting teachers know that the purpose of these interviews is to learn from their experience, so that the researcher and other beginning teachers will be able to apply their successful strategies shared during these interviews in their own classrooms.

The third ethical issue that must be considered in this study is that there is a small chance that the participants may feel like they or their experiences are being exploited in some way – the researcher has done everything in her power to avoid this issue arising by letting the participants know that they can either choose to have their full names or aliases used in the study, and that the
main purpose of the study is to help other teachers learn from their successful work applying poetry-based teaching strategies in their classrooms.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The most obvious limitation of this study is the fact that the small sample size (two participants) means that the findings may not be widely applicable. It is hoped, however, that the qualitative nature of this research approach (which seeks to discover only how certain teachers have successfully incorporated poetry into their language arts programs and how others in the field might learn from their example) will help mitigate this limitation to some degree. A more comprehensive study with more conclusive findings could certainly be conducted in the future, either by this researcher or by someone else who is interested in the questions this research has posed.

One of the main strengths of this study is that it has a personal dimension to it. The research topic was chosen based on the researcher’s personal experience and interests related to education, the participants were selected based on the connections made by the researcher through her work with English language learners, and the data was analyzed according to the researcher’s own understanding of the issues it addresses. The qualitative methodological approach taken to this study was beneficial because it allowed the researcher’s interest in and experience with ESL education and programming to inform her analysis of the data. The qualitative nature of this study allowed the researcher to engage with the data on a personal level, which left room for reflection and the incorporation of personal experiences into the data analysis. Taking a qualitative approach to this research study allowed the researcher to learn more about herself, her values, and her role as an educator over the course of the completion of the study.
Chapter 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction to the Chapter

The transcripts of the two semi-structured interviews discussed in this chapter have been compared and analysed based on a set of common themes. The three major themes that emerged during the interviews with both participants were:

- Identity
- Interest in the Intersections between Poetry, Music, and Language Learning
- Systemic/Administrative Challenges

In this chapter, each of the two major themes listed above will be discussed and analysed in light of the literature reviewed in chapter two, the insights and recommendations offered by the two research participants, and the researcher’s own experiences working with emerging bilingual students in Toronto Elementary schools.

4.1 Identity

A number of issues and questions related to identity for both teachers and students were discussed in the semi-structured interviews with research participants Joni and Lara, both of whom have many years of experience teaching music and language arts in Toronto schools with high populations of emerging bilingual students. For this reason, the theme of identity has been divided into the two sub-themes of teacher identity in the classroom and student identity in the classroom.

4.1.1 Teacher identity in the classroom

It is clear that both Laura and Joni’s educational and personal experiences with poetry, language arts, and music play a significant role in the various ways they choose to approach
sharing these subjects with the students they teach. Laura, for example, loved reading and writing poetry when she was in school, and this now motivates her to incorporate as much poetry as she can into her own teaching:

I was a music-poet kid. Like I was always a writer and a singer… so I always really responded to that kind of stuff, and I always really loved it in school… I feel like there wasn’t very much of it so I really ate it up when there was… so my background is totally this stuff. So I try to make it as prevalent in my teaching practice as I can.

Laura’s theatre and creative writing background form a significant part of her identity and, as a result, inform her current teaching practice in a number of ways. Laura has positive associations with poetry because poetry tells her a “story” that she can “identify” with.

Joni, meanwhile, remembers responding more to the rhythmic, movement and dance-related aspects of poetry, music, and song lyrics in her youth. Her memories of singing and dancing with her sisters while her mother improvised on the piano are some of her most “joyful.” These experiences helped her develop a lifelong love of music and an enduring interest in the interactions between music, text, and movement: “[music] was way more joyful [than it was in music class at school] when my mother would sit down at the piano and improvise and my sisters and I would sing and dance, and I think that really spoke to [my] physical enjoyment of the music.”

And although Joni’s past experiences with and points of entry into developing her love of music and verse are different Laura’s (e.g. more movement/rhythm based, more focussed on developing musical literacy along with language learning), Joni’s identity as a singer and her passion for music, poetry, and engaging with various forms of verse inform her current educational practice in many of the same ways that Laura’s experiences do. Joni said that she
“really encourage[ed] the teachers [in the afterschool program she directed]… to use a lot of poetry and text. Playground chants, things that could be repeated, and oftentimes repeated with actions so that the actions could be something that would reinforce the actual language.”

Because Joni’s childhood and other early experiences of music were associated with understanding and feeling rhythm movement of words, these are the ways in which she now seeks to incorporate poetry and language teaching into her practice.

These findings correspond with Lambirth’ Smith, and Steele’s 2013 study, mentioned in chapter two of this project, which found that teachers who find poetry “boring” or who have had negative experiences with poetry while they were in school tend to continue to develop negative associations with poetry throughout their adult years, and, as a result, are less likely to bring poetry-based activities into their classrooms. Additionally, Lambirth et al concluded that many teachers who do not have strong language arts backgrounds and who do not have positive associations with poetry find it particularly challenging or “risky” to assess students’ poetry because they feel “uncertainty” about which elements are “required” to qualify something as “good poetry” (Lambirth, Smith and Steele, 2013, p. 99).

4.1.2 Student identity in the classroom

Another idea related to the theme of identity that made up a large part of the discussion in both interviews was the sub-theme of student identity and experience, including the importance of working to bring ELL students’ cultural identities into the classroom in relevant and engaging ways. Both Laura and Joni observed that many students, like teachers, are much more likely to engage with a topic or activity if they feel they have the necessary background, experience, and skills to be able to succeed at it. Just as teachers who lack language arts training tend to feel uncomfortable assessing poetry and tend to avoid teaching it for this reason, Laura and Joni’s
students who are still in the process of learning English tend to encounter feelings of discomfort and self-doubt in language arts class because they feel they do not have the necessary skills to succeed. One way that teachers can help students cope with these sorts of feelings is by making it clear that students’ interests and learning experiences outside the classroom are valued and recognized as legitimate within the classroom. Both Laura and Joni spoke at length about the critical need to connect student voices and experiences to language arts subject matter in order to foster engagement with and further investment in students’ literacy and language learning.

Laura offered a wonderful example from her grade seven/eight split class (in which many of the students are emerging bilinguals) of a poetry activity that seeks to engage students’ identities both in and out of the classroom:

I’ve done an activity where kids bring in a song they love, one that’s special to them, then they have to bring a print out and then I give them a pair of scissors, and I say, ‘Now. Cut up all the lyrics and you’re going to make a poem out of it’… so it’s something they’re already attached to…and they also have an understanding of the theme. So then they distill it down to something… something that’s their own, [but] still has the main idea [of the song]. Or it could also [become] something totally different.

Laura seeks to bring her students’ various experiences with language, rap, and poetry from outside the classroom into her lessons because she believes her students already have the skills and background knowledge to be able to succeed in her class – it is just a matter of helping them recognize the connections between their own experiences and what is being taught in class:

Kids don’t think poetry, if it’s poetry they’re invested in – if it’s song lyrics and theatre – they don’t see it as school and they don’t see it as learning. So they have, like, a part of their brain that shuts off when I say ‘I want you to learn this.’ [But] they learn lyrics all
the time… they know lyrics by heart. And they think it’s incredible to learn a poem by heart but I’m like ‘guys, you can already recite ‘Uptown Funk’ by heart,’ and they rap in the schoolyard. Like, they know.

Laura seeks to bridge this gap is by asking her students to share songs, raps, or poems, including poetic texts in other languages, with the class in structured ways.

Another example of a poetry-based activity Laura does in her classroom that seeks to engage students’ cultural and personal identities are “I Am From” poems, where students are asked to provide descriptive details about their fondest memories, their childhoods, their everyday lives, and “all that makes up [them].” The idea is to get students writing about aspects of their “origins” and “roots” that can then be shared with the rest of the class.

While this definitely seems like a beneficial and inclusive learning activity in many ways, it is worth it to ask how it might be adapted to better include those emerging bilingual and/or racialized students who many not feel comfortable talking or writing about their “origins” in class for fear of being ostracized or made to feel ‘different.’ It is also important to ask whether putting the onus on students to be, essentially, ‘ambassadors’ for their ‘diverse cultures’ in a classroom where English is the language of instruction may in some cases do more harm than good. Culturally relevant pedagogy in language arts, as Johnston and Goettsch note in their 2000 paper mentioned in chapter two on this study, requires “us” as “[teachers] to be advocates for change our classrooms,” which means that teachers (especially white, L1 or native English speaking, and male teachers) need to do their own work and research when it comes to learning about their students’ cultural and linguistic backgrounds and incorporating those identities into the classroom in meaningful and sensitive ways. At the same time, it should be recognized that, especially in the multicultural schools of the TDSB, this task can seem overwhelming for many
teachers who feel they do not have the time, background, comfort level, or experience to do this successfully, and these teachers need to be supported.

One of the activities Laura does with her class that does a good job bringing students’ cultural identities into the classroom in a safe, sensitive, and very meaningful way is her “personal soundtrack” or “This is Me” activity. In this activity, Laura asks each of her students to curate a “soundtrack to [their] li[ves].” She asks the students prompting questions like “what’s the theme song of your like favourite childhood T.V. show?” or “what’s your song for when you’re really bummed and you just wanna wallow in it?” or “what’s your song when you’re like really pumped, or your inspirational song, or your love anthem?” She then has her students come together in groups to share their soundtracks and explain why the songs they chose were important to them. When Laura did this activity with her current class, many of her students chose songs in different languages and shared them with the class, which Laura says helped foster an atmosphere of acceptance and belonging in her classroom: “[the activity] helped with [students] getting to know each other and accepting each other.”

Laura also extended her personal playlist activity to include a cultural playlist activity, which she says encouraged her students to begin “making cultural connections with each other and finding new [songs]” and sharing them with one another. Laura noticed that during this activity many of the ELLs in her class “started getting confident and chipping in” to the class discussion, where they hadn’t during other, non-bilingual language arts activities.

Like Laura, Joni spoke about the ways in which she seeks to create an inclusive and welcoming learning environment by incorporating various aspects of her students’ cultural identities into her teaching. She said that just as she has things to teach her students that are informed by her background and experiences, her students have many things to teach her:
In one of my early years of teaching I knew I was going to be teaching in an area of the city that had a lot of Greek students. So I went ahead and learned a whole bunch of Greek folk dances and Greek folk songs and then I used them in my music program there. And the interesting thing that I learned about that was that it was important for me to be using something that came from their heritage, but more importantly the fact that they saw me as a learner and they got to teach me, because of course my pronunciation wasn’t very good. And I did things like I unwittingly would teach everybody a dance that is only ever danced by the men. So the children were the ones who were teaching me. I think that really was something that I learned the importance of your students seeing you as someone who’s learning and someone that they can teach as well.

It was important for Joni’s students to understand that their experiences and backgrounds from outside the classroom were being brought into and valued in their music class, but more than that, it was important for them to see that she was trying her best to learn about and understand aspects of Greek culture, and, most importantly, that this was an area in which she was definitely no expert. This helped Joni develop a relationship of mutual respect and trust with her students, where both she and her students saw learning as an exchange rather than a primarily teacher-centered activity.

Joni and Laura’s insights about student identity, engagement, and belonging in the classroom are supported by Jones’ 2010 study in which he emphasized the usefulness of teaching autobiographical poetry as a means of providing “accessible points of entry to complex literary ideas for English language learners” (Jones 2010, p. 16). Laura and Joni’s insights are also supported by Schorr’s study that found that “integrat[ing] reading and writing around meaning-making tasks” (like Laura’s personal soundtrack activity where students explained what makes
their favourite songs significant and meaningful to them) helps students engage with language learning because it helps them see it as being “personally relevant” to their lives and experiences (Schorr 2010, p. 36). Finally, Laura’s success with incorporating bilingual texts chosen by her students into her poetry lessons recalls Park et al’s study about the increase in student engagement that many high school teachers saw after doing poetry translation activities where the students interpreted poems and then translated those poems from their L1s into English.

4.2 Interest in the Intersections between Poetry, Music, and Language Learning

Another prevalent theme that was discussed in these two semi-structured interviews was both participants’ interest in the many intersections between poetry and musical literacy, and in how both poetry and music activities can help foster English language fluency and successful English language learning for emerging bilingual students. Both Joni and Laura asserted that music offers an accessible and engaging entry point into learning how to read, write, and analyse poetry, especially for language learners. When speaking about her personal soundtrack activity, Laura commented on music’s unique ability provide entry points that help make the many joys and benefits of poetry accessible for students, and especially students who are still developing their fluency in English:

The thing with music… [is that] the kids feel like they belong to it, and they’re invested in it. And we have a lot of conversations [in class] about, like, ‘what is art?’ and ‘why does art matter to people?’ And this applies to poetry too, like it’s different from sports or other things that are really exciting to us… art teaches us about being human and it’s how we relate to other humans and the reason that song makes you cry is that you feel… what [.for example,] Taylor Swift is feeling, too. And you’re connected. And that’s why we have all these attachments to artists in ways that feel so real.
Laura observed that, for her students, music often functions as a gateway to enjoying and appreciating other forms of art, such as poetry and visual art.

Similarly, Joni, who has a classical music background, expressed her enthusiasm for using songs, word games, and playground chants to foster fluency in English and help make poetic texts more accessible for her emerging bilingual students:

Some of the types of exploration that I do in class with text… are encouraging people to play with words, and to feel that words are there to be enjoyed and to create with. It’s that aspect of play that is embedded with using lyrics and songs and using text… that offers a really big opportunity for fluency to build.

Joni also discussed the ways in which music and poetry can be used to bridge the gap between her primary and junior aged emerging bilingual students’ content knowledge and language proficiency, just as the poetry translation activities mentioned in Park et al’s study did for older students:

There’s something that I remember reading that a child’s raised in a literate household where the parents read and there are reading materials around end up coming to kindergarten with already two thousand pre-literacy hours already covered. When you think of a child who is an English language learner that may have had those literacy hours in another language, which is very incredible and helpful, classes like music can help bridge that gap in helping finding some of those literacy hours.

Joni commented that over the course of her teaching career, she has found that setting words to music has helped the ELLs in her classes become more comfortable with speaking and has helped them feel more free to play around with words and explore language and sounds. She also
mentioned how singing songs can emphasize the natural cadence and rhythms of language, which is helpful for students in developing fluency in English.

Joni and Laura’s experiences using music to make poetic content more accessible for ELLs are mirrored in the experiences that Starz and Hadaway et al outline in their qualitative studies on the benefits of fostering fluency in English through studying poetry. Hadaway and her colleagues found that the structured and “collaborative” nature of whole-class music-based poetry activities such as “call and response” and “singing poems” helped their emerging bilingual students feel more comfortable participating in class. Hadaway et al noted that many ELLs in their classes experienced “worry” about correct grammar and sentence structure when participating in class and that this often led them to stay silent in class and to avoid speaking out or taking risks. They also emphasized that music and poetry provide safe, engaging, and “unintimidating” or “low stakes” opportunities for ELLs to develop their English language skills (Hadaway 2001, p. 796). Similarly, Starz emphasizes that singing and poetry activities are a “non-threatening” way for students to engage with texts and “express [their] feelings” about and interpretations of poems and song lyrics (Starz 1995, p.3).

While Johnston and Goettsch’s assertion that simply substituting ‘diverse’ texts for canonical Western ones when doing these kinds of music and poetry-based activities aimed at younger students like “call-and-response” songs is not enough to make them accessible or relevant for all emerging bilingual students, Laura and Joni’s comments about seeing learning as a reciprocal process between teacher and students, incorporating bilingual songs and texts into their language programs, and fostering community and meaningful cross-cultural connection may offer a way forward. When teachers make an effort to draw out the ways in which poetry connects with their own interests and educational backgrounds (i.e. the subjects they are most
comfortable teaching), are humble about their own lack of knowledge in certain areas and are willing to let their students see them as learners, and are able to embrace the potential discomfort of bringing other languages into their classrooms, fun, engaging, and culturally responsive poetry teaching and learning really can happen.

4.3 Systemic and Administrative Challenges

Finally, both Joni and Laura spoke about systemic and administrative challenges associated with teaching music and poetry. Many of the challenges Laura brought up had to do with the difficulty of demonstrating to parents and administration that she is making the necessary “accommodations and modifications” for the ELLs in her class when it comes to language learning. Because many of the poetry activities that Laura does in her classes involve a “hands on, in the moment” approach to “making adjustments” for students, she does not feel that she can “rewrite lessons” beforehand or anticipate many of the accommodations she will need to make for her ELL students. Laura believes making accommodation is “an art, not a science,” and finds that much of the paperwork she is required to do for and about her ELL students or students with exceptionalities is “unnecessary” since it does not seem to benefit her students in any tangible way.

While Joni, like Laura, expressed frustration about the systemic and administrative challenges that she encounters when teaching music and poetry, she also expressed optimism and demonstrated a proactive approach to tackling some of the barriers that Laura mentioned in her interview. Although Joni has had positive experiences with music and poetry throughout her life, very few of her “joyful” early memories of engaging with these subjects come from her experiences within the school system. In fact, she stated that “the vast majority of [her] own music [learning] probably happened outside the school system.”
Over the course of her career as an educator, Joni has noticed that teacher support for subjects like music and language teaching has become less accessible as administrative and support roles in the TDSB have become more streamlined and centralized, with fewer support workers dividing their time between more schools:

[The amount of music teaching that happens in any given school] depends on if [teachers] are in a school system where they can get any kind of resources help… You know, at a time when the TDSB had more people in the instructional lead positions, they could actually handle calls from classrooms saying, you know, ‘I’m a grade one teacher. Could you come and help me with my music?’ And they would be able to send people out. And I think that [the school board] has not maintained that.

However, despite these challenges, Joni has found innovative ways to do the most she can to bring music and poetry into her teaching with the resources available to her. She tries her best to stay up to date on new resources for teachers looking to develop their music teaching skills (which she believes are intrinsically tied to language learning skills and building fluency):

There’s a curriculum series called ‘The Game Plan’ that I think is actually one of the better curriculum series out there because it’s very diverse and is set out in such a way that someone who’s not trained as a music specialist can pick it up and find their way through the smaller steps of things. And it has a lot of supportive resources.

Joni also likes working with “found sounds” when doing music activities with her class in order to teach students that rhythms and poetic structures are all around us in the real world, waiting to be discovered. Describing her previous experiences teaching music in Edmonton, Joni recalled that she and her students would “use the whole building as [their] classroom… so that the curriculum [wa]s taught through what [was] available to [them] in the building.”
4.4 Recommendations

Joni and Laura made both explicit and implicit recommendations to the Toronto District School Board and its teachers, particularly beginning teachers, related to ways that poetry and music-based language arts activities can be made more accessible to emerging bilingual students. Three main recommendations stood out.

First, teachers should make poetry relevant, current, and engaging for students by drawing connections with music. Both participants recommended that teachers bring music (both music they like and music their students like) into the classroom in order to help draw connections between their students’ skills and experiences outside the classroom (and skills that have been developed in a language other than English) and the poetry content being taught in class.

Second, teachers should seek out – and the TDSB should provide – more, and more effective, PD opportunities and workshops so that teachers can continue to develop their music and poetry teaching skills. The participants made suggestions for various PD workshops and documents that Toronto teachers (particularly beginning teachers, but experienced teachers as well) can access and refer to in order to extend their knowledge and personal understanding around musical literacy and different forms of poetry, including Indigenous forms of poetry as well as from across various cultures (e.g. The Game Plan curriculum for teaching music).

Finally, Toronto school boards should increase the number of instructional lead positions. Joni implicitly recommended that school boards should hire more instructional leads so that Elementary school teachers in Toronto have easier and more direct access to support across various subjects, including music and language arts.

4.5 Summary
In these two semi-structured interviews, participants Laura and Joni were first asked how their educational backgrounds, previous experiences with poetry in school, and associations with poetry inform their current teaching practices. Laura and Joni responded that their positive associations with poetry and their backgrounds in the arts have encouraged them to incorporate poetry into their language arts teaching in ways that they are comfortable with and that align with their educational backgrounds. Laura, who has a theatre and creative writing background, teaches poetry through both music and drama while Joni, who has a classical music background, teaches it mainly through whole-class music and rhythm activities. Laura and Joni also reported that students were more engaged with and experienced more educational benefits from poetry activities when those activities drew on and connected in easily identifiable ways with their extra-curricular interests and personal and cultural identities both in and out of the classroom.

Secondly, Joni and Laura observed that poetry is often best taught through music, as music highlights the natural rhythms of language, is often engaging and relevant for students, promotes learning through patterns and repetition, and promotes community-building in a non-threatening and low stakes context.

Finally, Joni and Laura noted some of the administrative challenges and systemic barriers to teaching music and poetry effectively in Toronto classrooms that they experience. Joni made recommendations as to how some of these challenges might be overcome.

These findings suggest that the most effective way for Elementary educators in the TDSB to experience success in incorporating poetry into their language arts teaching is by working to find ways in which poetry connects with their teachable subjects, educational backgrounds, and other interests, as well as with the linguistic and cultural backgrounds and interests of their students. The following and final chapter of this study will discuss the implications of this
research, its limitations, and its connections to current literature. It will also make suggestions for future directions.
Chapter 5: DISCUSSION

5.0 Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter begins by providing a brief overview of the key findings of the research analyzed in chapter four and gleaned from interviews with two educators with many years of experience teaching emerging bilingual students in Toronto Elementary schools. The chapter discusses the broad implications of these findings for the educational research community and the narrow implications for the professional identity and practice of the researcher as a beginning teacher. The chapter then reviews some of the limitations of the study and identifies areas for further research.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings

In chapter four of this study, two semi-structured interviews with the research participants were analyzed by the researcher and grouped into three major themes: 1) identity, 2) interest in the intersections between poetry, music, and language learning, and 3) the systemic and administrative challenges associated with teaching music, poetry, and the arts in general in the Toronto District School Board, where support for educators delivering the Ontario Arts Curriculum is seen by many as severely lacking. Participants were asked how their educational backgrounds, previous experiences, and associations with poetry in schools informed their current teaching practices and how they seek to make their poetry and music lessons culturally relevant, engaging, and inclusive for emerging bilingual students in their classes. Because both teachers had positive associations with poetry growing up and felt comfortable teaching poetry to their students, they sought to incorporate it into their practice as much as possible. Both participants believed that poetry activities helped the emerging bilingual students in their classes develop their English language skills in fun, community-centred, and meaningful ways.
Both participants observed that poetry is often best taught through music because music highlights the natural rhythms and cadences of language, is engaging for students, and promotes community-building in a low stakes and high interest context. Both participants cited various cross-curricular language and music activities that encouraged students to engage with poetry in ways that had personal significance and cultural relevance to them and their diverse interests and experiences.

The participants also discussed some of the administrative challenges and systemic barriers to teaching music and poetry effectively in Toronto classrooms that they have experienced over the course of their careers as educators in the TDSB. Joni observed that low support for music teachers is a problem in Toronto schools because many of the Elementary educators who are expected to teach music or who wish to incorporate music into their Language, Math, or Science lessons possess little musical training or expertise. She advocates for the creation of more instructional lead positions in TDSB Elementary schools so that teachers who want to learn how to draw meaningful connections between music and their lessons in other subjects have the option to access supports that will enable them to do this effectively.

5.2 Implications

In this section, I explore the implications of this research for the educational community as well as its implications for the development of my own professional identity and practice as a teacher-researcher.

5.2.1 Broad implications: The educational research community

These research findings have implications for the educational community because they demonstrate that when teachers connect the interests and experiences of their students to the
activities they use to teach and explore poetry, the results are positive for their emerging bilingual students and L1 English speaking students alike. When teachers make an effort to become comfortable with the subject matter of poetry, and at the same time strive to remain open to new learning experiences led by their students, meaningful and culturally relevant teaching of poetry can take place. This means that the freedom to experiment, play, and take risks with language that the study of poetry has been shown to promote in both Elementary and Secondary school-aged students can be made more accessible to all learners, and not just those who have achieved native-like fluency in English (as has traditionally been the case in many Canadian schools). It is important for ELLs to have access to opportunities to express themselves in English in creative ways, and one way teachers can provide these kinds of opportunities is by encouraging their students to read, write, and engage with poetry.

The findings of this study are also important for the educational community because they provide educators with examples of activities that have worked for real teachers with their own specific sets of strengths and challenges in the classroom. Although every teacher is different, it may be helpful for readers to see some of the ways teachers have addressed challenges and drawn on their strengths in order to provide more engaging and personally significant language arts programs for ELL students. Readers of this study may face some of the same challenges and may be able to apply some of the solutions to their own educational contexts.

Finally, these findings have implications for the educational community because they demonstrate that professional development (especially pre-service courses in appreciating and teaching poetry) really does work to help teachers bring poetry into their classrooms in ways that are meaningful and engaging for their students. This shows that although there are many teachers who feel uncomfortable or uncertain teaching poetry in classes with high numbers of ELLs, this
discomfort and uncertainty can be overcome through hard work and a dedication to learning about poetry and the various contexts in which it is used across cultures. This is crucial work for any teacher who is serious about helping the ELLs in their classes bridge the knowledge gap between their developed skills and competencies in their L1s and emerging competencies in their L2s. The study of poetry can help teachers provide emerging bilingual students with high interest, developmentally appropriate, highly accessible learning materials that give students the opportunity to develop their English language skills in a context that is engaging and motivating, and that intersects in interesting and exciting ways with the linguistic and cultural capital they already possess.

5.2.2 Narrow implications: Professional identity and practice

These findings also have implications for the development of my own professional identity and teaching practice in Toronto Elementary schools. Over the course of my research I was challenged to examine my own biases, assumptions, and privileges when it came to language learning, and specifically English language learning. Having never experienced being an L2 learner of English myself, I was always able to express my ideas with relative ease when I was in school, which made curriculum knowledge much more readily accessible to me.

It is challenging to measure the progress of every student against a grade level standard when some students have much further to go – not necessarily in their content knowledge, but in terms of their ability to clearly express their thoughts and ideas in English – in order to reach that standard than others. It is my job as a future educator of emergent bilingual students to engage with research and discover and implement strategies for supporting these students in bridging the gap between their content knowledge and their proficiency in English. Drawing on bilingual resources, using songs and poems, and employing student-centred pedagogical
approaches can go a long way in providing ELLs with the tools they require in order to succeed in English-language classrooms.

Designing learning tasks that, like the poetry activities discussed in this study, provide L2 learners of English with a creative outlet through which to explore things like figurative language and imagery, developing tone and mood, and manipulating sentence structure are an important part of what it means for teachers to set high expectations for emerging bilingual students. Creative tasks like poetry composition and translation provide ELLs with opportunities not only to demonstrate their proficiency in English, but also with opportunities to explore the unique ways in which their knowledge of another/other language(s) interacts with their learning of English and influences their creative choices. Providing ELL students with opportunities to read, write, and analyse poetry is also valuable for teachers who wish to gain insight into their students’ strengths, learning styles, personalities, and life experiences.

5.3 Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study is the fact that the very small sample size of two participants meant that the findings may not be widely applicable across all schools. It is hoped, however, that the qualitative nature of this research approach, which seeks to discover how certain teachers have successfully incorporated poetry into their language arts programs and how others in the field might learn from their experiences, helps readers view the study less as a prescriptive manual and more as a guide that can be adapted and augmented in a variety of contexts in the diverse schools and classrooms across Toronto and beyond. A more comprehensive study with more conclusive findings and a greater number of research participants would be better able to address the quantitative research questions (e.g. the
widespread impact of teaching poetry on learning outcomes for ELLs in Toronto schools) that this study was prevented from addressing due to its small scale and qualitative methodology.

Another limitation of this study is that the data analysis in chapter four is informed in part by the researcher’s experiences, political beliefs, and values. Although no study is ever truly objective, the fact that both research participants were teachers whose educational philosophies aligned with that of the researcher, as well as the fact that the participants were chosen by the researcher for just this reason, certainly makes this study less objective than it could have been had the researcher interviewed a larger number and more diverse sample of teachers.

Finally, both of the teachers interviewed, as well as the researcher, are L1 speakers of English who have never experienced attending schools where the language of instruction is a language other than their L1. As a result, the researcher and the research participants have no direct knowledge of the kinds of experiences L2 learners of English face in TDSB schools. Their suggestions for culturally relevant poetry and music activities, therefore, may include more assumptions or biases about the experiences of emergent bilingual students in Toronto schools than, for example, poetry or music activities suggested by a teacher who has experienced being taught in a language of instruction that is different from his or her L1.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Given the limitations of this study, it is necessary to identify some areas for further research on the topic of supporting emerging bilingual students through teaching poetry and music in engaging and culturally responsive ways. One such area might be a study on a larger scale in which more teachers and a more diverse sample of teachers are interviewed about their experiences teaching poetry in classes with high numbers of emerging bilingual students. Another possible approach might be to interview teachers who have been L2 learners of English
themselves and compare the strategies these teachers use to teach poetry to their students to the strategies used by their English-as-L1 counterparts. Exploring the ways teachers draw on their own experiences as a means of engaging with and deepening their understanding of the experiences of their students might also be an interesting avenue of study, as would examining the before and after effects of professional development courses that seek to help teachers become more comfortable analysing, writing, and assessing poetry in order to be better able to share the joys and the benefits of studying poetry with their students.
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Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date: ____________________

Dear ____________________,

My name is Isabel Stokes and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on finding new ways to teach poetry in ESL settings to help English language learners with language acquisition. I am interested in interviewing teachers who have are both passionate about poetry and have experience teaching English language learners. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide great insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected computer and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor Rose-Fine Meyer. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.
Sincerely,
Isabel Stokes
isabel.stokes@mail.utoronto.ca

Course Instructor’s Name: Dr. Rose Fine Meyer
Contact Info: ________________________________

Consent Form
I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw from this research study at any time without penalty.
I have read the letter provided to me by Isabel Stokes and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: ________________________________

Name: (printed) ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn about the strategies teachers use to incorporate poetry into their lessons with English language learners. This study is for the purpose of finding out new ways of using poetry as a way of helping students with English language acquisition. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of question focused on your experiences teaching English language learners. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Background Information
1. What grade and subjects do you teach?
2. What kind of experience do you have teaching English language learners? Do you currently have English language learners in your class?
3. When did you first become interested in poetry?
4. What was your experience with being taught poetry when you were in school?

Teacher Perspectives/Beliefs
1. Why do you believe that it is important to teach poetry?
2. Do you see poetry as having a special usefulness when it comes to teaching English language learners?
3. What has been your experience when encountering students’ attitudes toward reading, creating, and sharing poetry in your own classrooms?

Teacher Practices
1. What strategies have you used to help make poetry more accessible to the English language learners in your classes? How do you seek to make your poetry lessons culturally responsive and appropriate for your students’ varying levels of fluency in English?
2. What kinds of poetry-based activities have your students, especially ELLs, enjoyed the most in your classes?
3. What kind of impacts have you seen of your poetry activities on student engagement in class, especially with ELLS?
4. What have you perceived to be the learning outcomes of your poetry-centred lessons, in terms of helping students develop fluency in written and spoken English in an academic setting?
5. How do you design your poetry lessons or units? What factors do you take into consideration when planning these lessons or units?
Supports and Challenges

1. What are some of the challenges you have faced when teaching poetry? Have you faced any challenges particularly related to assessing students’ poetry?

2. How have you dealt with these challenges? Are there any particular resources that you have found helpful? (online, collaboration with other teacher etc.)

Next Steps

1. What advice would you offer to beginning teachers who would like to use poetry as a strategy for supporting the learning of the ELLs in their classes?

Thank you for your participation in this research study.