

# Journal of Southeast Asian Language Teaching



A refereed journal of the Council of Teachers of Southeast Asian Languages

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*Journal of Southeast Asian Language Teaching*  
Volume 13, No. 1, 2007

## Using Poetry to Teach Vietnamese

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Poetry is a very effective tool in teaching languages, especially Vietnamese. Vietnamese people love poetry. A Western sociologist whose name I cannot recall once commented that “every Vietnamese is a poet.” This is reflected in the fact that even an illiterate Vietnamese peasant woman has memorized the entire body of *The Tale of Kieu* by Nguyen Du – a literary work that has been compared to timeless verses of Shakespeare – so that she can recite verses that would aptly describe the present situation as she sees fit. This phenomenon is a common happening among all levels of Vietnamese society.

There are many definitions of poetry. For myself, I like this definition: “Poetry is emotion and thoughts distilled in images and echoes in musical rhythms.” For this reason, when teaching poetry, we also guide students in developing vocabulary and understanding metaphors that express emotions and thoughts, as well as the concepts of rhythms and tones. These are important components in the language of any people.

At the University of California, Los Angeles, I have had the opportunity to teach Vietnamese from beginning to advanced levels. I have used poetry in every level to teach Vietnamese, and I have found that it is not only an effective tool but also one that generates the interest and engagement of students.

### 1. Teaching Reading

Reading is an important skill in language learning. To be able to read Vietnamese, one must understand the three basic components of a Vietnamese word: Rhyme, beginning sound, and tone.

Example: CHỜ

Rhyme: O

Beginning sound: CH

Tone: lower soft tone (HUYỀN)

Putting these components together we can read the word. Instead of telling students these things, we can use poetry to inspire and engage them. I often create poems for teaching new rhymes:

Em tôi rất đơn **sơ**  
Hay tựa cửa ngóng **chờ**  
Khi tâm hồn rộng **mở**  
Em viết những dòng **thơ**

My sister is very innocent.  
She likes to wait by the window sill  
With her heart open wide she sits until.  
Her notebook of poetry is filled.

Em tôi hay mộng **mơ**  
Khi nhìn ánh sao **mờ**  
Em thường hay than **thở**  
Và ra vào ngẩn **ngơ**

My sister is a dreamer looking afar;  
Wordlessly she observes the fading stars.  
She often laments their fate,  
Moving in a dream-like state.

Rồi hết tuổi ngây **thơ**  
Em tôi thấy **bơ vơ**  
Đôi khi em nhung **nhớ**  
Chuỗi ngày đẹp như **mơ**.

Leaving her innocent stage one day,  
My sister felt lonely and sad.  
At times she reminisces about the past;  
Those days of innocence did not last.

After teaching students those words that have the same rhymes (O), I will have students practice other words with the same rhyme such as **hững hờ** ‘unconcerned,’ **lờ mờ** ‘dim,’ **ngghi ngờ** ‘suspicion,’ **tôn thờ** ‘worship,’ **lãng lờ** ‘indolent,’ **lầm lẫn** ‘to be at fault,’ **hơi thở** ‘breath,’ and **lo sợ** ‘worry with fear.’

## 2. Teaching Basic Concepts

When learning a new language, students must learn new concepts and vocabulary expressed through that language such as measurement, colors, dates, body parts, numbers, and places. If one teaches these concepts as isolated vocabulary lessons, students might become bored. However, teaching them through poetry generates interest and engagement.

### A. Measurement

Anh vẫn nhớ em ngồi đây, tóc ngắn  
Mà mùa thu dài lắm ở chung quanh.  
(Nguyễn Sa)

I remember you sitting here with your short hair  
During the time that the long autumn was surrounding us.

## B. Colors

Áo nàng vàng, tôi về yêu hoa cúc,  
Áo nàng xanh, tôi mến lá sân trường.  
Sợ thư tình không đủ nghĩa yêu đương  
Tôi thay mực cho vừa màu áo tím.

When her dress is yellow, I love chrysanthemums.  
When her dress is green, I love the leaves on the school grounds.  
Worried that my love letter might not adequately express my love,  
I change the color of the ink to match her purple dress.

## C. Dates, Seasons

Tháng Sáu trời mưa, trời mưa không dứt  
Trời không mưa anh cố lạy trời mưa.

In June it rains and rains without stopping;  
When it does not rain, I pray for rain.

Trời hôm nay mưa nhiều hay rất nắng  
Mưa tôi chả về bong bóng vỡ đây tay.

Today, is it raining or sunny?  
If it's raining and bubbles are bursting in my hands, I will not return.

Em chợt đến, chợt đi, anh vẫn biết  
Trời chợt mưa, chợt nắng chẳng vì đâu.

You come and go suddenly, I know,  
Like the sudden rain or sunshine that comes for no reason.

## D. Body parts

Ai cầm tay cho đỏ má em hồng  
Ai thở nhẹ cho mây vào trong tóc.

Who holds your hand to make your cheeks blush?  
Who breathes gently to bring the clouds into your hair?

Hãy cười bằng mắt, hãy ngủ bằng vai  
Hãy để môi rót rượu vào môi  
Hãy cầm tay bằng ngón tay bản loạn.

Let's smile with eyes and sleep on shoulders;  
Let's pour wine from lips to lips.  
Let's hold hands with frantic fingers.

### **E. Numbers**

Trời hôm ấy mười lăm hay mười tám  
Tuổi của nàng anh nhớ chỉ mười ba.

What day was it, the fifteenth or the eighteenth?  
Her age I remember: just thirteen!

Gặp một bữa anh đã mừng một bữa,  
Gặp hai hôm thành nhị hỉ của tâm hồn.

Seeing you one day I am happy for one day;  
Seeing you two days brings twice the joy to my soul.

### **F. Places**

Nắng Sài Gòn anh đi mà chợt mát  
Bởi vì em mặc áo lụa Hà Đông.

The hot sun of Saigon has suddenly cooled down  
Because you are wearing the dress of silk from Ha Dong.

### **Conclusion**

There are many other examples to show that poetry can be a very effective medium for language teaching and learning.

Perhaps at another time I will have the opportunity to share how poetry is used to teach at the advanced level of Vietnamese; at that time, I will describe the ideals, feelings, and cultural values of the Vietnamese people (content), as well as the word usage and rhythms (format) that appear in the poetry. Such knowledge and skills are necessary to appreciate Vietnamese literature.