

# Building empathy toward migrants via poetry

**Daniel Xerri** describes using poetry to help students understand better why people sometimes have to leave their homeland.

Over the past few years, migration has become one of the most pressing global issues. For example, in 2015 more than 65 million people were forcibly displaced by war and related factors (UNHCR, 2016b). Given our responsibility to engage students with global issues as a means of battling inequity (Xerri, 2017a), addressing migration in the course of teaching English seems incumbent on us as educators. In this article I describe how I used some of my English lessons as a means of discussing migration with teenage students.

Malta, my home country, is fairly familiar with the phenomenon of migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea from

North Africa to avoid persecution, conflict and poverty. Since 2002, around 19,000 migrants have arrived by boat from Libya (UNHCR, 2016a). For a country with a population of not more than 440,000 people, that is a significant figure. However, the UNHCR (2016a) estimates that less than 30% of the total number of migrants have stayed in Malta.

I decided to address the issue of migration because I noticed that some of my students held very negative attitudes towards migrants, which directly reflected the rhetoric of far-right politicians. One common accusation was that migrants were 'invading the country' and making it 'unsafe'. I felt that these sentiments were partly due to an

inability or unwillingness to empathise with migrants.

## Using poetry to build empathy

Poetry is recognised as a powerful tool in the development of empathy in young people, partly by building their understanding of perspectives they might not be aware of (Xerri & Xerri Agius, 2015). From my research, I knew that multicultural poetry could be used to build empathy in the English language classroom (Xerri, 2012; 2015). Thus, I used a small selection of contemporary, multicultural poems about migration to give students exposure to new perspectives.

Instead of only reading the work of white poets from the Anglo-American literary tradition, who are more common in the Maltese educational system, we diversified our reading. I crucially chose poets who wrote about the modern reality of migration. In some cases, they were poets who were migrants themselves. For example, we read 'Home' by the Somali-British poet Warsan Shire (2011), who writes that 'No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark' (p24). I used this poem to spark debate about poetry focusing on migration (Xerri, 2017b). The poem also encouraged students to develop an appreciation of why migrants flee their homeland and how



they risk their lives on their journeys. Such poems offered an insight into a reality that had, up to then, always been mediated by those distant from it or else hostile to it.

## Lesson activities

The activities I did with my students focused primarily on enabling them to critically engage with poems about migration, both as aesthetic artefacts and as windows on experiences that we were insulated from thanks to our privileged context. I introduced the poems by first activating the students' own knowledge about migration using photos or newspaper articles about a recent arrival of a group of migrants. I did not explain why I had chosen the poems but encouraged them to discuss the aesthetic and thematic qualities of a poem in small groups and as a class. In most cases, the students were able to evaluate the qualities in a poem that made it worthy of discussion in an academic context.

One common activity was asking the students to adopt the perspective of the speaker in a poem about migration in a creative manner, such as via the writing of their own poetry. This was not always easy for the students to do given their distance from the experiences mentioned in the poem. However, most students managed to extend the thoughts expressed in a poem and produce their own verse. Another activity was that of encouraging the students to not only write a critical commentary on a poem, as they would typically do in an exam, but to invite them to produce a more personal response to it in either writing or speech. Hence, the students became used to explaining how a poem spoke to them as individuals and what they felt in relation to it and its subject matter. I believe that this last activity was essential given that it helped to personalise the experience of engaging with a poem.

## Students' responses

Moderating class discussions about the poems and providing feedback on the students' written responses was not always easy given the deep-seated beliefs of certain students with regards

to migration and the provocative declarations that they sometimes made. For example, one specific student remained highly negative in his comments about migration despite our reading of a number of poems about this topic. Rather than dismissing his views or seeking to ignore him, I encouraged him to reflect on why he held such views and whether he would still have thought in the same way had he been living in a different context.

On the whole, the classroom dialogue spurred by the poems broadened our perspectives on migration and provided the distance needed to examine our beliefs. This dialogue was not just between the students but also with the voice of each poem. The views the students expressed became much more empathetic. I saw students increasingly celebrate diversity and recognise that everyone is entitled to seek protection and better prospects beyond one's homeland. For instance, one student wrote that 'This poem has made me understand what migrants go through when they run away from their home. It has also made me realise how cruel we can sometimes be in Europe when we selfishly try to shield ourselves from the desperate pleas of fellow human beings.'

As educators we are highly influential, but we are only one factor in fostering empathy. Some of my students resisted the idea that they should be hospitable to those seeking refuge. However, I realised that it was important to keep looking for ways to expose them to new perspectives. The way we approach our role as teachers can lead to much more than the learning of English.

## Conclusion

Based on my experience, I would advise English language teachers not to shy away from the issue of migration. Despite its contentious nature, it is a topic that has to be discussed and ideally this should happen in the safe environment of the classroom. Using the work of migrant poets is an excellent means of enriching classroom dialogue about this global issue. In addition, it is important to give all students the opportunity to voice their views, even

if as a means of making them critically reflect on the reasons for which they hold certain views and the implications of such views. Enabling students to examine their beliefs about migration is as important as exposing them to socially sidelined perspectives.

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