River Swimming

by Lynley Edmeades
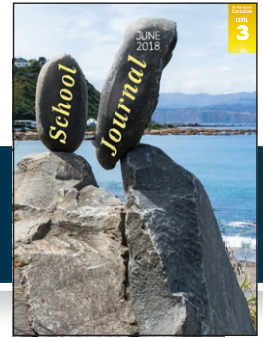
Overview

This TSM contains information and suggestions for teachers to pick and choose from, depending on the needs of their students and their purpose for using the text. The materials provide multiple opportunities for revisiting the text several times.

"River Swimming" is a beautiful poem that captures the imaginative, make-believe world that children inhabit. The setting is a day out at the river. While the adults sit and drink tea on the river bank, the children race each other in an imaginary lane pool and become mermaids, remembering to keep a safe distance from the taniwha upstream. The poem is rich in imagery and movement. It draws on the pleasures of picnics, swimming, and the beauty of the natural world. The poem would be useful for a poetry reading.

This article:

▪ uses familiar images of swimming, family outings, and the natural world

▪ blends the real and the imagined

▪ evokes sensory associations

▪ uses poetic features, such as alliteration and adjectives formed using hyphenated words

▪ has a three-verse structure with fairly regular line lengths and a broken last line.

A PDF of the text is available at www.schooljournal.tki.org.nz

Text characteristics from the year 6 reading standard

We have retained the links to the National Standards while a new assessment and reporting system is being developed. For more information on assessing and reporting in the post-National Standards era, see: http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-and-reporting-guide

> Watercress came home with you in a plastic bag
> and Mum would dish up some for dinner,
> little tastes of river-fresh that wouldn't live
> another day. Dad would say you were eating
> rabbit food, and you'd wonder what he meant –
> you'd never seen a rabbit in the river before.
> After dinner you'd find your uneaten chocolate
> underneath the damp towel in your bag.
> It had melted and set again in the shape
> of a rabbit.   Or a taniwha.
>
> *Lynley Edmeades*

some ideas and information that are conveyed indirectly and require students to infer by drawing on several related pieces of information in the text

> beside the river on the bank, drinking tea
> from flasks and commenting on the weather.
> Make-believe was everywhere they couldn't see:
> the current was a lane pool to race each other,
> flapping furiously towards nowhere;
> the silver slivers of trout were the taniwha's
> minions, emerging from the shadows
> to make sure you didn't go too far upstream;
> underwater, you were a mermaid, hair fur-soft
> your skin aglitter and sun-through-water blue.
>
> Watercress came home with you in a plastic bag

sentences that vary in length and in structure (for example, sentences that begin in different ways and different kinds of complex sentences with a number of subordinate clauses)

> the current was a lane pool to race each other,
> flapping furiously towards nowhere;
> the silver slivers of trout were the taniwha's
> minions, emerging from the shadows
> to make sure you didn't go too far upstream;
> underwater, you were a mermaid, hair fur-soft
> your skin aglitter and sun-through-water blue.
>
> Watercress came home with you in a plastic bag
> and Mum would dish up some for dinner,
> little tastes of river-fresh that wouldn't live
> another day. Dad would say you were eating
> rabbit food, and you'd wonder what he meant –

a significant amount of vocabulary that is unfamiliar to the students (including academic and content-specific words and phrases), which is generally explained in the text by words or illustrations

> beside the river on the bank, drinking tea
> from flasks and commenting on the weather.
> Make-believe was everywhere they couldn't see:
> the current was a lane pool to race each other,
> flapping furiously towards nowhere;
> the silver slivers of trout were the taniwha's
> minions, emerging from the shadows
> to make sure you didn't go too far upstream;
> underwater, you were a mermaid, hair fur-soft
> your skin aglitter and sun-through-water blue.
>
> Watercress came home with you in a plastic bag
> and Mum would dish up some for dinner,

figurative and/or ambiguous language that the context helps students to understand

Reading standard: by the end of year 6

Text and language challenges

(Some of the suggestions for possible supporting strategies may be more useful before reading, but they can be used at any time in response to students' needs.)

VOCABULARY

- Possibly unfamiliar words and phrases, including "boogie board", "flasks", "current", "lane pool", "slivers", "trout", "taniwha", "minions", "emerging", "upstream", "aglitter", "watercress", "river-fresh"

Possible supporting strategies

- Not many words in this poem are likely to cause difficulty for students, especially if they draw on their peers for support. Some words may be less familiar for students who haven't experienced picnics or days out at a pool, river, lake, or beach, for example, "boogie board", "flask", and "lane pool".
- *The English Language Learning Progressions: Introduction*, pages 39–46, has useful information about learning vocabulary.
- See also ESOL Online, Vocabulary, for examples of other strategies to support students with vocabulary.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED

- Some experience of picnics and/or family outings and swimming
- Familiarity with poetry and poetic structures
- Some understanding of the different ways that children and adults experience the world

Possible supporting strategies

- Encourage the students to make connections to their own experiences of outings. Most students will have experiences of going on a day trip with their parents or caregivers, even if the outing didn't involve swimming in a river, lake, or at the beach.
- Examine the illustration together and have the students brainstorm what the girl is feeling and thinking, using the five senses.
- Explain that language used in poems doesn't always follow the same rules as language in prose and that writers use this freedom very deliberately and for particular purposes. Encourage the students to understand that the use of unusual language can be a technique to get a reader's attention.
- Some English language learners may have little experience of poetry. For these students, build up their background knowledge by sharing and discussing some simple poems with them before reading this text.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE

- Written in the second person and is autobiographical, which is an unusual combination
- Uses past tense throughout
- The structure reflects the events that take place before, during, and after the river swim
- Uses such language features as alliteration, metaphors, tone, and enjambment (continuing a sentence beyond the end of a line or stanza)
- Includes a number of hyphenated words, for example, "fur-soft", "sun-through-water blue", and "river-fresh".
- Uses some unconventional grammar, for example, the absence of commas in the final line of stanza 1.
- Includes one long sentence broken by a colon and several semi-colons
- Meaning is often carried from one line to the next
- One sentence spans two stanzas:
    Too cold too fast too blue: the adults sat
    beside the river on the bank, drinking tea.

Possible supporting strategies

- Explain that the poem is autobiographical – the reader is sharing a childhood memory, and what it was like to be a child, with her readers.
- Prompt recall of what your students know about poetry and how poetry and prose differ.
- Prompt students to observe how the structure of the poem reflects a progression of events: getting ready to go on an outing; swimming in the river; winding down at the end of the day. Encourage them to look for connections across stanzas.
- Encourage the students to notice language features that create visual images or sensations for the reader. Draw attention to the hyphenated words in the poem and discuss the images or sensations they evoke.
- Discuss the pace and tone of the poem and the ways the poet has used language features to create these, for example, the use of a colon followed by phrases separated by semi-colons that keeps the ideas flowing one after the other.
- Prompt the students to notice and then discuss with their peers examples of unconventional grammar or parts of the poem they found hard to follow. Explain that poets use words and phrases very carefully and that using unconventional grammar or ways of structuring sentences is almost always deliberate and has a purpose. Have the students discuss why the writer might have used language in unconventional ways.
- Read the poem aloud to help students follow the ideas and clarify meaning. Listening to the poem being read and taking part in shadow and choral readings will help English language learners to develop a sense of the rhythm of English. It will also help them improve their use of pitch and pronounce sounds more accurately.

Sounds and Words

Possible curriculum contexts

ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 3 – Language features: Show a developing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.

– Structure: Show a developing understanding of text structures.

ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 3 – Language features: Use language features appropriately, showing a developing understanding of their effects.

Possible first reading purpose

- To make connections between the poem and the students' own memories of family outings
- To notice the images and sensations the poem evokes.

Possible subsequent reading purposes

- To identify the tone of the poem and the feeling that pervades the text
- To find out how a writer uses words to create visual images and sensory associations
- To explore language features such as alliteration, metaphors, tone, and enjambment
- To identify how the writer shows that children and adults experience and respond to the world in different ways.

Possible writing purposes

- To write a poem about a memory of a day out
- To write a poem or piece of prose that shows how ordinary things can become magical with make-believe
- To write a poem or piece of prose that shows how children and adults view the world differently
- To create and use hyphenated words and language features in writing to create visual images and evoke sensations
- To practise using colons and semi-colons in poetry or prose.

The New Zealand Curriculum

Instructional focus – Reading

English Level 3 – Language features: Show a developing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts;
Structure: Show a developing understanding of text structures.

First reading

- Share the purpose for reading with the students.
- Provide a very brief overview of the poem. It may be necessary to point out that the poem is written as prose.
- You may like to begin with pairs of students describing a family outing to one another.
- Prompt students to pay attention to the different images and sensations the poem evokes.
- Prompt students to identify the tone of the poem, for example, whether it is happy, sad, or nostalgic.

If the students require more scaffolding

- To help activate prior knowledge, have the students brainstorm a list of items that their family would need to pack for a picnic at a river.
- Have the students think, pair, and share how they would feel before going on the picnic, during the picnic, and after they arrive home. Record their ideas on a simple chart like the one below. Repeat each step for recording how their parents would feel at each stage of the day. After reading, add how the poet felt. Have them discuss with their partner the similarities and differences between these people.

Brainstorm words to describe the feelings of each person about going on a picnic to a river.

How do they feel?	Myself	My parents	The poet
Before going on the picnic			
During the picnic			
After the picnic			

- This is quite a long and dense poem for students at this level. You may like to break the reading into three stages, priming the students to think about what they need to do to get ready for a day out (stanza 1); what it is like to swim in a river, lake, or at the beach (stanza 2); what happens when you get home from a full day out (stanza 3).
- Ask students to identify parts of the poem they find hard to understand or parts of the structure that they find challenging, for example, the sentence that continues across two stanzas.
- Read the poem aloud, using your voice to convey the meaning, for example, reading through the list of "essential" items like a check list or using tone of voice to express the magical feeling of being in the river and of make-believe. Allow time for repeated readings and provide explicit feedback to your English language learners on their pronunciation, use of pitch, rhythm, and fluency.

Subsequent readings How you approach subsequent readings will depend on your reading purpose. Where possible, have the students work in pairs to discuss the questions and prompts in this section.

The teacher

Encourage students to read the poem aloud to each other and to notice ways that the writer has created different images and sensations. Have them respond in pairs to the following questions:

- *What did you see, hear, taste, and feel as you read the poem?*
- *How has the writer used language to create images that connect with your senses?*
- *What language features (such as metaphors or alliteration) can you identify?*
- *What words has the writer created for the poem? How do these relate to the theme of the poem?*

English language learners who are less familiar with English may not recognise the made-up words used in the poem. Explore how those words were created and the effect they have in the poem. Practise creating poetic words to describe various images and feelings by combining two or more words using a hyphen.

The students:

- identify specific examples of what they can see (such as "sun-through-water blue"), hear (the sound of children "flapping furiously"), taste ("little tastes of river-fresh"), and feel ("hair fur-soft")
- identify examples of alliteration ("flapping furiously") and metaphor ("the silver slivers of trout were the taniwha's minions")
- identify made-up words (such as "fur-soft", "river-fresh") that relate to the theme of make-believe and imagination.

The teacher

Encourage the students to identify how the structure of the text and the title show that river swimming is the main focus of the poem. Have them work in pairs to discuss the following questions.

- *How does the structure of the poem make swimming in the river the main focus of the poem?*
- *What connections can you find across stanzas? What effect do these have?*

The teacher

Prompt the students to infer meaning.

- *Was swimming in the water a common activity for the writer, or something extra special and/or unusual? How do you know?*

The students:

- make comparisons about children's perspectives and those of adults, for example:
  - what are considered essential items for a day at the river
  - whether the river is swimmable
  - adults talking about the weather while the children enjoy a magical make-believe world
  - Dad using a metaphor that the child doesn't immediately understand.
- discuss whether the writer has captured the feeling of being a child and give examples to support their responses.

The students:

- make inferences about whether this was a common activity for the writer and use examples across the text to justify their responses.

GIVE FEEDBACK

- *You've described how this poem made you feel and the images it brought to mind. See if you can find some examples of how the writer has used language in special ways to give the poem a magical feel.*
- *You've made connections to your own family outings and shared a funny story about all the things you forgot when you went on a day walk. Relating a poem to our own experience can help us to understand and appreciate the poem more.*

METACOGNITION

- *Is it possible to write from a child's perspective when you are an adult? What helps us to write stories or poems from another person's perspective?*
- *How important is it to connect with people's senses when you are writing a poem?*
- *How does the experience of poetry change when you hear it read aloud and when you read it in your mind?*

Reading standard: by the end of year 6

The Literacy Learning Progressions

Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

English Level 3 – Language features: Use language features appropriately, showing a developing understanding of their effects; Purposes and audiences: Show a developing understanding of how to shape texts for different purposes and audiences.

Text excerpts from "River Swimming"	Examples of text characteristics	Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)
underwater, you were a mermaid, hair fur-soft your skin aglitter and sun-through-water blue	**SENSORY LANGUAGE** *Sensory language involves using words and details that appeal to a reader's physical senses.*	The writer of "River Swimming" has created unconventional adjectives that have strong sensory associations. Explain that using sensory language in poetry can intensify the impact of a poem. ▪ *One way to create strong sensory images is to use adjectives, similes, or metaphors that have strong sensations attached to them. In this poem, the writer has created adjectives by hyphenating words to make them stronger and more effective.* ▪ *One way we can develop our skills as writers is to borrow techniques from a writer and adapt them for our own purposes.* Have the students imagine a sensory experience they have had, such as eating a delicious meal or sitting in the hot sun. Prompt them to develop metaphors or similes to describe the experience, then work with them to turn them into hyphenated adjectives. You could ask the students to close their eyes and think of a special place. ▪ *Is it indoors or outdoors? What do you see and hear – what colours and sounds? Are people there? What are they doing? How do they feel? How do you feel?* Have them draw the picture they formed and then explain it to a partner. This allows students to formulate the vocabulary they will need to add description and emotion to their poetry. Select one of the students' pictures to use in shared writing to create a poem based on the experience. Model creating poetic language (such as similes, metaphors, and hyphenated adjectives) and the creative use of language structures and punctuation. Afterwards, the students can create their own poem based on their picture. Some students may benefit from the provision of a writing frame.
Make-believe was everywhere they couldn't see: the current was a lane pool to race each other, flapping furiously towards nowhere; the silver slivers of trout were the taniwha's minions, emerging from the shadows to make sure you didn't go too far upstream; underwater, you were a mermaid, hair fur-soft your skin aglitter and sun-through-water blue.	**PACE AND TONE** *Writers use punctuation to create a sense of pace.* *Along with other factors such as vocabulary and figurative language, pace, helps to create tone.* *The tone of a poem conveys the way the writer feels about or views a situation; it's also the mood the poem creates.*	Read the poem aloud to show how each stanza has a different rhythm and pace but all three stanzas have a happy, feel-good tone. Some English language learners will require a lot of support to understand the pace and rhythm of the poem, especially students whose language is spoken using an evenly spaced time-interval between each syllable/word, for example, Mandarin. Some languages are also spoken with an evenly pitched voice. In English, we not only vary the pitch and pace but we also run words or sounds together or leave some words out altogether (ellipses). Provide English language learners with repeated opportunities to hear the poem being read while they read along, or through shadow or choral readings. Students could present this poem to an audience as a choral reading or record an audio version of themselves reading to share with their friends and family. ▪ *In poems, punctuation plays an important role in giving the poem pace: using lots of full stops creates a stop–start rhythm; removing commas speeds things up; a colon creates a sense of anticipation (what is about to follow?); semi-colons allow one idea to flow on to the next; a big space between words slows things down.* ▪ *Changing the pace of the poem can affect the mood or tone of the poem.* ▪ *When you write your own poems, think about the ways that the punctuation you use – or don't use – impacts on the pace and how this affects the feel of the poem.*

Text excerpts from "River Swimming"	Examples of text characteristics	Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)
Your mum always remembered the stuff you would forget: sunblock, hat, a blanket for later, toilet paper (just in case). You took care of the essentials: togs, towel, boogie board, the last of the chocolate you got for Christmas that you'd been hiding from your sisters.	**PERSPECTIVE** *Perspective is a tool that lets us know whose lens we are looking through when we read a poem.*	Explain what an autobiographical poem is. Discuss what features of the poem show that the poet is sharing her own memories of river swimming rather than more general experiences. Point out that autobiographical poems usually use the words "I" or "we", but this one uses "you" and "your", which is unusual. Using "you" instead of "I" makes it sound like the experiences in the poem were shared by lots of children, even though the use of details show that the memories are specific to the narrator. ▪ *Adding specifc details when writing about an experience or a feeling gives a text a personal feel and helps your reader to understand your way of seeing the world. Using specific details can make your writing seem more interesting and real.* ▪ *Perhaps the writer of "River Swimming" uses "you" rather than "I" to show that days out at the river were something lots of children enjoyed. Using specific details that are really personal makes it a lively and fascinating read, but also makes it clear that we are hearing the narrator's personal experience of river swimming, even if she doesn't use the words "I" or "we".*

METACOGNITION

▪ *What techniques did you use to give your poem a sense of tone? Why did you choose those techniques and not others?*

▪ *Can you add too much detail or too little detail to a poem? How do you know when you have added the right amount of detail?*

GIVE FEEDBACK

▪ *I like the way you're testing out different uses of punctuation in your poem. How about giving it to someone else to read to see whether it's creating the effect you want?*

Writing standard: by the end of year 6

The Literacy Learning Progressions