Off By Heart: teacher’s notes

About the project
Off By Heart is an exciting new initiative from the BBC which aims to encourage primary school pupils to engage with learning and reciting poetry.

There will be a national competition with regional heats into which every primary school in the UK can enter a child aged 7–11 to compete for the title of UK Poetry Recital Champion. The process will be documented in an Off By Heart film including the grand finale. Airing in early spring 2009, the film will capture the children’s enthusiasm and passion for poetry, producing a captivating and inspirational programme for BBC Two.

However, the competition is only one element of this project. Award-winning BBC Learning will work with the Library Association and UK schools to encourage children to discover the joys of learning and reciting poetry, whatever their ‘performance’ level: it’s not about ‘putting on a show’ but about discovering and celebrating the richness of the spoken word, of allowing poetry to speak and bringing children’s creative energies to the words of our great poets.

You can find out more about the competition element of this project and how to register your interest at bbc.co.uk/schools/teachers/offbyheart

The poems
Children can work on any poems for the classroom-based activities in these notes but for the competition they need to select one from the list of poems below. You can find copies of these poems at bbc.co.uk/schools/teachers/offbyheart/poems.shtml.

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Aim of these notes
These notes are designed to help teachers to use poetry-learning and recital as part of the curriculum and in school assemblies. They present a range of ideas for activities which can stand alone or be part of a larger project which might lead to some children taking part in the competition. Although the competition is for solo performance, we recognise that this will not suit all children and that there are great educational benefits in devising and performing choral interpretations of the poems, so a number of the ideas in these notes are for group-based, workshop-style activities. Again, these can stand alone or be the starting point for further work, enabling a personalised learning approach.
How to use the teacher’s notes
These notes have been devised on the premise that teachers know best, so we do not offer a prescriptive approach but a range of suggestions from which you can choose and which you can adapt to your own situation and teaching style. We suggest that a good starting point would be to take one or two of the simple workshop ideas and use them to generate some fun and creative engagement with the poems. You could then move on to some of the group-based poetry performance ideas, perhaps performing some in an assembly at which you introduce the notion of the competition and ask for volunteers.

Why should my school take part?
- Poetry offers children many creative opportunities in reading and understanding; add to this the performance elements offered by this project and you have a powerful way of delivering a range of curriculum aims related to Speaking and Listening, and English literature (see below).
- For many children this project will provide a confidence-boosting experience as they understand, learn and then perform the poems.
- Children who participate at any level in this project will gain a genuine sense of achievement.
- Off By Heart provides UK school children with the opportunity to be part of an important national initiative with the chance to represent their school on TV.
- The project also offers an exciting new element to school assemblies where the whole school can be involved in hearing and celebrating performance.

How can this project help me deliver the curriculum?
The Off By Heart project is a natural fit with the KS2 curriculum in the areas of Literacy and Speaking and Listening.

READING
Knowledge, Skills and Understanding

Reading strategies
1. To read with fluency, accuracy and understanding, pupils should be taught to use:
   a. phonemic awareness and phonetic knowledge
   b. word recognition and graphic knowledge
   c. knowledge of grammatical structures
   d. contextual understanding

Understanding texts
2. Pupils should be taught to:
   a. use inference and deduction
   b. look for meaning beyond the literal

Literature
4. To develop understanding and appreciation of literary texts, pupils should be taught to:
   a. recognise the choice, use and effect of figurative language, vocabulary and patterns of language
   b. identify different ways of constructing sentences and their effects
   e. evaluate ideas and themes that broaden perspectives and extend thinking
   f. consider poetic forms and their effects
   h. respond imaginatively, drawing on the whole text and other reading
   i. read stories, poems and plays aloud

Breadth of study
Literature
8. The range should include:
   c. a range of good-quality modern poetry
   d. classic poetry

SPEAKING AND LISTENING
Knowledge, Skills and Understanding
See the relevant points from the Speaking and Listening curriculum statutory content here: http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/key-stages-1-and-2/subjects/english/keystage2/index.aspx

Speaking
1. To speak with confidence in a range of contexts, adapting their speech for a range of purposes and audiences, pupils should be taught to:
   b. maintain the interest and response of different audiences (for example, by exaggeration, humour, varying pace and using persuasive language to achieve particular effects)
   e. speak audibly and clearly, using spoken standard English in formal contexts
   f. evaluate their speech and reflect on how it varies

Listening
2. To listen, understand and respond appropriately to others, pupils should be taught to:
   b. ask relevant questions to clarify, extend and follow up ideas

Breadth of study
Speaking
8. The range should include:
   a. reading aloud
   b. presenting to different audiences

Listening
9. The range should include opportunities for pupils to listen to:
   a. live talks/readings/presentations
   c. others in groups

Drama activities
11. The range should include:
   c. responding to performances

Many KS2 teaching objectives relate to the study and performance of poetry, some of which are outlined below. They can be found in the Primary National Strategy document entitled Speaking, Listening, Learning: Working with children in Key Stages 1 and 2. http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/literacy/818497/pns_speaklisten062403acts.pdf

29. Speaking
To choose and prepare poems or stories for performance, identifying appropriate expression, tone, volume and use of voices and other sounds e.g. presenting poems from other cultures using intonation to interpret punctuation and emphasise meaning (Links to National Literacy Strategy text objectives 4 and 5)

32. Drama
To identify and discuss qualities of others’ performances, including gesture, action, costume e.g. responding to a live or recorded performance by selecting dramatic features for comment

55. Listening
To analyse the use of persuasive language e.g. how a speaker uses emphasis, rhetoric and gesture effectively

60. Group discussion and interaction
To understand and use a variety of ways to criticise constructively and respond to criticism e.g. seeking clarification, offering additional information, adjusting ideas about content and style of presentations

61. Drama
To consider the overall impact of a live or recorded performance, identifying dramatic ways of conveying characters’ ideas and building tension e.g. evaluating different performances of an adaptation of a classic text
(Links to National Literacy Strategy text objectives 1 and 9)

Involving parents and the community
This project offers many opportunities for involving parents, including:

- running a poetry performance evening
- involving parents as helpers
- holding a special parents’ assembly featuring poetry performance

Involving the wider community:

- reciting poems in different settings e.g. local places of worship or somewhere outdoors – you could hold an event in a local park
- liaison with local poetry groups and/or amateur dramatic companies

Ideas for lesson plans

Breathing and relaxation exercises
Stress the value of deep breathing before any vocal work and point out that this is good not only for the voice but as a way of ‘centring’, calming nerves and focusing on a performance.

Breathing
Ensure that the children are standing comfortably. You might ask them to close their eyes so that they can concentrate better. Ask them to begin to become aware of their breathing and slowly take deeper and deeper breaths: “Think about getting the air right down deep into your lungs, a little deeper with each breath.”
You’re encouraging them to breathe from their diaphragms, not to take the shallow ‘top of lung’ breaths that we often do.
Ask them each to put a hand on their diaphragm so that they can feel it move as they breathe. You can give a count such as: “Breathe in 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and hold 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and out 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8” – repeating this a few times.
To aid concentration, ask them to listen to and identify sounds outside the room: “How many different sounds can you hear? Where are they coming from? What sort of sounds are they?”
If you know the group well enough, you can bring the focus to sounds inside the room but be ready for disruptive bodily noises that could so easily ruin your calming atmosphere!
Appropriate calming music can also be used.

Relaxing
When they are comfortably breathing in a slow, regular and deep fashion, move on to relaxation exercises. Start with the toes and work through the whole body to the head, asking the children to tense and then relax each set of muscles a couple of times, so: “Tense your toes, then relax them”; and repeat this before moving on to the tops of the feet, calves and so on.
When you get to the face, there are lots of muscles to experiment with!

At the end of your breathing and relaxation session, ask the children to open their eyes and shake out their fingers and toes. They should feel relaxed and ready for vocal work.

Vocal warm-ups

Tongue twisters
Children may well know some tongue twisters such as “Red lorry, yellow lorry...” or its evil twin – “Red lorry, yellow lorry, red leather, yellow leather...”; “Unique New York”, or, if you're feeling very brave, “Peggy Babcock”. This last phrase really gives the tongue and lips a workout and it is very hard to keep repeating it, especially if you speed up.

Chewing gum
Something that is usually banned in the classroom, but ask the children to imagine that they are chewing some magic gum that gets bigger as you chew so that eventually your mouth and tongue are working overtime just trying to contain it. Finish with it magically disappearing with a pop or, if you're so inclined, ask the children to remove it and all throw it to stick on the ceiling!

Mouthabet
Ask the children to put their tongues against the back of their lower front teeth and recite the alphabet. This gives the vocal chords and lips a good workout! It can be messy, though, so tilting the head back slightly helps to keep the floor clean...

Singing
Singing is a good vocal warm-up. Simple songs are best so that children can enjoy singing and open up their lungs. Rounds are an enjoyable way to start a vocal session. You can find out more about rounds at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schemes2/music/mus17/17q2?view=get

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Rhythm and pace exercise
Take the first verse of William Blake’s poem, The Tyger:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Teach it to the children so that they can all deliver it clearly and on beat. Use a percussion instrument to mark time. Display the words on a whiteboard or flip chart – an interactive whiteboard is best for this activity. Once the children know the poem off by heart, remove the second line so that they recite the poem without it, keeping to time. Do the same with other lines. Then include only the last word of each line so that the children mark time and just say “bright... night... eye... symmetry”. Once the children have mastered this, use just a few words from different parts of the poem so that children say, for example: “bright... forests... night... What... symmetry”. You could develop this into a performance of the whole verse (or the whole poem if you can) with different groups of children spread around the room, each delivering only some of the words, thus creating a spatial, choral work.

Point out to the children how this approach fits the nature of the poem with its sense of magic and mysterious power, and how the sound coming from all around matches the idea of the forest where sounds can startle and surprise.

Understanding what you’re saying
This exercise is based on Matilda by Hilaire Belloc but can work equally well with any narrative poem. Either in groups or individually, ask the children to read the poem and then create a storyboard version of it – like a simple comic strip with images showing the action and brief descriptions. This will help children to understand the events of the poem and to order them correctly.
You can create a drama version of this using still pictures (also known as frozen pictures or tableaux) in which children ‘freeze’ into different positions to tell the story. A third approach is to mime the story as it is read, thus linking an understanding of the action to the words of the poem.

**Learning the words**
The best way to learn a poem off by heart is by repetition, becoming so familiar with it that you don’t have to think about it: the words and their order become as familiar as the alphabet or counting to 100. However, there are dangers and limitations in this approach:

- Rote learning can kill meaning as children become over-familiar with the words and they are ‘just words’ with as much significance as a shopping list.
- Some children become quickly bored and the project loses focus and impetus.
- Children learn at different rates and have varying abilities; your star performer may be a slow learner and your fastest learner may bring little in the way of understanding or vocal interpretation.

Fortunately there are some simple techniques that can aid learning and bring some variety to the process. You can adapt these tips so that they can be used individually, in small groups or for a whole class learning the same poem.

**Notes**
As children become familiar with a poem, let them use cue cards with reminders on, perhaps of the first line of each verse or of particular lines or words that they find difficult to remember. In time, they won’t need these cards but, often, just the fact of having them if needed boosts confidence.

**Vary your practice times**
Slip in unannounced practices when the children least expect it, taking just a few moments to run through the poem a couple of times. Make this fun and don’t labour the need to get it right. You can use all sorts of odd times in the day for this – recite as you walk to the swimming pool, or when queuing for lunch, for example. Why not take five minutes out in the middle of doing something else: down pens or calculators and recite the poem twice, then go straight back to what you were doing. You will probably find that this quick change of focus is actually beneficial to what you were doing – how often have you got stuck on a crossword or Sudoku-type puzzle only to find that, if you go and do something else, on your return you know the answer?

Give each child a copy of the poem and ask them to read it before they go to sleep as this is a good time to learn things.

**Picture it**
Teach the children to associate particular parts of the poem with a striking image so that for “…who can defy the Law…” in *Macavity – the Mystery Cat* by T S Eliot, for example, they may think of a strong image of a cat telling off a police officer. Encourage them to use this technique for hard-to-remember sections.

**Using the voice effectively**
Help children to appreciate the power of the voice to convey meaning, not just by what is said but also by the way it is said.

Take the first verse of *Macavity – the Mystery Cat* by T S Eliot:

“Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw –
For he's the master criminal who can defy the Law.
He's the bafflement of Scotland Yard, the Flying Squad's despair:
For when they reach the scene of crime – Macavity's not there!”

And ask the children, working all together, to recite it with different emotions:
Unhappy (quiet, flat, even intonation)
delighted (lively, bouncy – smile as you speak)
mysterious (questioning, pausing to think – imagine there’s someone out of sight just behind you).  
Ask them which is the most appropriate feeling for the words of the poem.  
Can they identify other parts of the poem where they might add to the feeling by the way that they say the words, for example:  
‘Mystery Cat’ – mysterious  
‘master criminal’ – exaggerated like a film trailer  
‘bafflement’ – confused (accompanied by head scratching)  
‘Macavity’s not there’ – mysterious

The children could mark up their copies of the poem, picking out a few key words or phrases to deliver with a particular inflection.

You can encourage them to go over the top initially, putting in as much emphasis as they can, then, as they rehearse, they can refine their performances so that there is a good balance between the meaning, the emotional impact and the rhythm of the poem.

Dealing with nerves
Most children and adults become nervous at the thought of performance and this may be exacerbated for those who take part in the competition with its requirement for solo performances of the poems. Here are some tips to tell the children:

• Prepare well with more rehearsal than you think you need, then, when you get nervous, think back over all the work you’ve done and tell yourself that you’re as ready as you possibly can be.
• Remember your breathing and relaxation exercises and make a conscious effort to breathe deeply before the performance so that your body is ready.
• Think back to a previous successful performance, perhaps in front of the class or in an assembly, and remind yourself how well it went – if it worked then, there’s no reason why it shouldn’t work now!
• If you can, get to the venue early and stand on the performance space, work out how many steps there are from the ‘offstage’ area to your ‘spot’ – one less thing to worry about when the big moment comes!
• Decide where you will look while you perform the poem. A good tip is to find something on the far wall which is just above your eyeline so that you are looking slightly up (such as a clock or exit sign), but this will vary from venue to venue so, again, check it out in advance if you can.

Group performances
When the children have run through a few of the workshop exercises, ask them to work in groups to deliver a group performance of one of the poems (or an extract). They will need to think about:
Rhythm  
Clarity  
How they will split the words between speakers  
Which parts will be solo voice and which choral  
Tone of voice  
Emotion

They could also think about adding sounds such as the sound of the forest for Tyger, the meows of cats or things being broken for Macavity.  

Ask them to rehearse their poem (or extract) so that they are ready to perform it to the rest of the class and use this as an opportunity to develop critical skills, asking everyone what worked well and why.

Other resources
Films of well-known faces reciting some of the poems are available online at the BBC Schools site: bbc.co.uk/schools/teachers/offbyheart
The poems can be found at: bbc.co.uk/schools/teachers/offbyheart/poems.shtml
For details of how to enter the competition, see bbc.co.uk/schools/teachers/offbyheart

Other relevant sites
For helping children to make sense of poetry, see:
bbc.co.uk/schools/ks2bitesize/english/revision_bites/poetry.shtml
For more interactive poetry ideas, see:
www.talkingteaching.co.uk/resources/show_resource.cfm?id=107

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BOOKS

Poetry KS2: Key Stage 2 (Curriculum Bank)
by Moira Andrew
ISBN: 978-0590537872
Structured and progressive activities for poetry at KS2/Scottish levels C–E.
Sections on reading and shared poetry, writing poetry, using a pattern and playing with forms.
Many poems are provided as photocopiable, and there are also photocopiable worksheets.

Mind Your Own Business KS2 (Literacy Hour Units)
by Alison Kelly
Illustrations by Quentin Blake
ISBN: 978-0439016285
Lesson plans for using poems within the Literacy Hour structure and photocopiable activity sheets for pupils. An overview grid gives at-a-glance information about the word, sentence and text-level work covered. Each teacher’s book has an A1, double-sided, text-based poster in the middle for use as shared text for whole-class teaching.

Mind Your Own Business
by Michael Rosen
Illustrations by Quentin Blake
ISBN: 978-0590542388
This collection of poems is used by Alison Kelly as the stimulus for her book above. These poems reflect the experiences of children and portray their feelings in authentic, everyday language.

Speaking, Listening and Drama: KS2 Years 3–4
by John Airs and Chris Ball
Illustrations by Cathy Gilligan
ISBN: 978-1902239972

The Confidence Book
by Gordon Lamont
ISBN: 978-1847090010
Aimed at adults but with many ideas applicable to children who perform in front of others, the book covers: breathing, relaxation, body language, learning speeches, keeping calm and much more.