Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative 2014 Volume II: Playing with Poems: Rules, Tools, and Games

Using Poetry Songs to Teach Fluency Using Literature about Navajo Culture in an ELL Classroom

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Overview

Throughout Shiprock, people prepare for the fair. Those who will sell food, jewelry, pottery, and other items set up at their booths and tables alongside the roads. Music drifts through the air, and people hope for a bit of rain so it won't be too dusty. The scents of fry bread, stew, and roasted mutton rise from outdoor grills. It makes everyone hungry. The smell of strong, fresh coffee mingles with the noises of passing cars, country music, sizzling fry bread, and children begging for candy, The whole town brims with excitement. It is almost time for Shiprock fair. 1

When I was a child, there was always excitement and anticipation in the air as Shiprock Fair came closer. Everyone at school would talk about their favorite event or favorite part of the fair. I remember loading mattresses, blankets, ice chest full of pre-cooked food, jugs of water, jackets, and folding chairs into my dad's truck early in the morning before the sun came up. We didn't mind getting up very early. In fact, we stayed up late the night before, despite warnings from our parents to go to sleep, because we could not contain our excitement. My young siblings and I would pile into the camper, while my mom, dad, and two older siblings would ride in the cab. The excitement intensified as my dad zoomed through the busy traffic to get a parking spot as close to the venue as possible, and to selected a good spot to watch the parade. The parade was always a favorite event. The excerpt of the poetry by Luci Tapahonso which I use as an epigraph to this unit tells the story of how Shiprock Fair elicits excitement among children and adults alike.

Shiprock Fair is the oldest and most traditional Navajo fair on the Navajo reservation. The event is held annually the first week of October to celebrate the year's harvest and Navajo culture and tradition. Shiprock Fair is a unique event on the Navajo reservation because it lasts a week-long and includes Indian Markets, Social Songs and Dances, and Pow-wows. Navajos dress in their best traditional outfits and finest turquoise jewelry or in colorful regalia and feathers ready to enjoy an evening of cultural assembly and union through pow-wows and Navajo Social Song and Dance. Contemporary events like rodeos, carnivals, and parades balance out the celebration with cowboys trying to beat the 8 second ride, sounds of children yelling and screaming with elation on carnival rides and enjoying the colorful floats that promote culture, health, and organizations.

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The intent of the unit is not so much to reconnect my students with the Navajo Language, but to use their knowledge of their culture and the Navajo culture around them as a tool to introduce and study poetry and through poetry to help my students develop English Language speaking and reading fluency. Research suggests that oral proficiency in English is associated with English reading comprehension and writing skills. ²

Every child on the Navajo reservation can relate to Shiprock Fair. The Beauty of using Shiprock Fair as my topic is every child can relate to the many different cultural events and activities. In addition, the fair provides many opportunities to introduce and teach poetry and songs that celebrate culture. Navajo culture present at the fair will serve as a connection to cultural identity for the students. As a teacher I recognize that there is a link between cultural background and approaches to learning. In this unit, I intend to teach my ELL students that Native American poets are storytellers. Although Native American poets have their own style, there is rhythm involved. Furthermore, the unit is meant to improve language development by reciting poems, building vocabulary, reading fluency, and challenge students to read and interpret poems with more text complexity.

Poetry and Navajo Cultural Identity

Patriotism is also a huge part of Shiprock Fair. Navajos have a long tumultuous history with the federal government. Enduring treaty after treaty, the devastating march to Hweeldi, and harsh treatment of school aged children at government schools during boarding school era, Navajos persevered. Anyone would reason that Navajos would be the least patriotic people in the United States. Yet during Shiprock Fair, patriotism can be observed through honoring the Navajo Nation Flag and America Flag. Furthermore, pride can easily be witnessed during Navajo Nation Fairs, Fourth of July celebrations, and other social gatherings. Color guards carry colorful flags that represent our country, our state, and our tribe into arenas to open ceremonies. Navajo flag songs and "Star Spangled Banner 3" heralding the sacredness and pride of the flag resonate through the crowds gathered to start any celebrations or event. Luci Tapahonso wrote a poem titled *That American Flag 4* that reminds us of the enduring courage our grandparents showed. The poem itself captures the spirit of patriotism, similar to the poem verse written by Katherine Lee Bates in "America the Beautiful". 5 "Battle Hymn of the Republic" is a song and a poem that emphasizes patriotism through repetition and rhyming.

In Tapahonso's poem about the flag, *That American Flag*, she starts off by telling us about a friend of hers who refers to the flag as ubiquitous, which caused her to reflect:

But later that night, I wanted to call her and explain about the American flag and us Navajos. Let me tell you, I wanted to say, that in the mid-1800s that flag meant fear and untold turmoil. Let me tell you, there was little we understood about those who followed the American flag onto our land That thin rectangle of fabric rippled in the dry gusts of wind as the troops approached Dinëtah. Though the men were five-fingered like us, their words Seemed loud and careless, and their mannerism, dramatic. ⁶

Then she goes on to explain how the soldiers moved the Navajos to Fort Sumner during the winter. Life at Fort Sumner camp was hard, but Navajos held on to their culture through rug weaving. Eventually, weavers added

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the stars and stripes into their rugs to represent their ancestral home. Towards the end of the poem, the meaning and symbolism of the flag changes:

Late that summer night, I wanted to tell my friend that We Navajos have many reasons not to honor the American flag, But often it reminds us of our grandparents' enduring courage. In the face of terrible odds, the stars and stripes came to mean That we would return to our homeland. It taught us that our mother, Nahasdzáán, cares for us as we care for ourselves and our children. ⁷

Honoring grandmothers and grandfathers have also become a huge part of Shiprock Fair. Navajo culture is a matrilineal society, meaning that mothers, sisters, aunts, and especially grandmothers are valued and respected. Many contemporary books and poems celebrate mothers, sisters, and grandmothers. Most grandmothers are remembered and honored for their abilities to weave beautiful rugs. Navajo rugs are still utilized as blankets and clothing during special events or celebrations. At Shiprock Fair, the Arts and Craft exhibit showcases numerous rugs and rug weavers. Poems like *The Navajo Rug – A Poem in Honor of the Weavers* ⁸ by Barbara J. Warren expressions admiration and respect for Navajo rug weavers. *Wisdom Weaver* is an important book for two reasons. One, the book teaches readers about patience and mental strength. Two, it exposes children to a simpler language, that children can read on their own. Reading books and poems about weaving enhances and supports poetry frames.

One of the best places to visit at the fair is usually the 4-H Exhibit. The exhibit features various animals, and the sheep are always a favorite. Most books about rug weaving expresses the Navajo culture's fondness and value for sheep. Many Navajo people regard sheep as the essence of life. Sheep are considered as a measure to wealth and therefore treated with so much respect and reverence. Many songs and prayers are offered to sheep to ensure longevity and health. The importance of sheep lies in the fact that sheep help sustain the life of their owners. ⁹ Mutton is the main source of diet for many Navajos. Furthermore, some nursery rhymes capitalize on sheep as a significant animal in every culture. Poems about weaving and sheep allow children to become knowledgeable in using rhymes and rhythm. These components of poetry are needed to become familiar with the English Language.

Horses are also revered and considered valued possessions in Navajo culture. At Shiprock Fair, horses are often the center attention at the rodeo arena. Horses are often seen prancing around with riders during warm ups preparing to bring in flags for opening ceremonies. During the rodeo event, horses race around barrels, chase after calves during calf roping and calf tying events, and bucking off cowboys during bareback bronc riding. In some events, horse and rider compete against each other.

The Navajos believe that horses were created with more value and graded higher than man. The following poem is a blue stallion song that a rider sings for luck during a horse race, emphasizing on the importance of horses and the spiritual connections between people and horses in the Navajo culture.

The turquoise horse prance with me. From where we start the turquoise horse is seen. The lightning flashes from the turquoise horse. The turquoise horse is terrifying. He stands on the upper circle of the rainbow. The sunbeam is his mouth for a bridle. He circles around all the people of the earth with their goods. Today he is on my side and I shall win with him. ¹⁰

When horses were created by the holy people, they neighed at dawn, but not everyone heard the neighs.

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Those who heard the neighs were blessed with horses and sheep. Others who did not hear the neigh do not have sheep or horses and are considered poor. ¹¹ Books like *Mystic Horse* tell us a story about a special connection between a boy and a horse. *Mustangs Are Born Free (Monchielle)* ¹² is another good example of a poem that supports the theme of the connection people have with horses. The poetry itself "is the creation of the popular Norwegian poet, Jim T Henriksen and usually consists of four stanzas. Each stanza consists of five lines of six syllables or if you prefer lambic Trimeter. The first line of each stanza is a refrain and in the four following lines, lines three (3) and five (5) rhyme." ¹³ Reading different types of poems to students help students become fluent readers.

Teaching on the Navajo Reservation

Kayenta Elementary School is located in the remote corner of the North Eastern Arizona on the Navajo reservation. Our school is part of the Kayenta Unified School District that serves about 1500 students. The school district serves the community of Kayenta, and also serves the surrounding communities of Rough Rock, Chilchinbeto, Denehotso, Monument Valley, Keams Canyon, Shonto, Cowsprings, and Black Mesa. Sometimes, it takes more than an hour to bus these students to the school, and another hour to transport them back home.

This year, I will be teaching in a self-contained English Language Development class, which means students who are identified as English Language Learners will be taught in my classroom. An Arizona State Mandate was passed through the legislative and voted in by the voters which rendered Arizona an English Only state. English Only entails English is the national public language for the state of Arizona. Children in government and public schools are taught English rapidly and effectively to become literate productive members of society. English Learners are taught in *Sheltered English Immersion* or *Structured English Immersion* classrooms where nearly all instruction is in English. English Learners are placed with other students that have the same degree of English proficiency. Subject matter including reading and writing are taught solely in English, with minimal use of the child's Native language. Native language is used only when necessary. 14

According to the mandate, public schools have to provide English Language learners a minimum of four hours of intensive English Language Arts instruction. The four hours are divided into one hour each for reading, grammar, writing, and vocabulary for fourth graders using Arizona State ELL Standards as guidance. The fourth grade English Language Learners will benefit from developing oral reading proficiency using the Listening and Speaking portion of the Arizona State ELL standards by performing, developing, and utilizing poems and prose with the Navajo Culture. My plan to teach this unit is intended for fourth grade English Language Learners (ELL). The Structured English Immersion (SEI) for ELL requires me to use English Language Proficiency (ELP) Standards to guide my instruction. The four domains in the ELP standards include listening and speaking, reading, writing, and language. Using the domains, I want students to recognize that poetry exists in Navajo culture.

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Rationale

The role of culture is important in bilingual education and ESL in developing and enabling student success. Language, racial background, names, clothing, and food are commonly associated with cultural traits. These traits are relevant contributions to cultural identity. Cultural identity is important in establishing emotional support and self-esteem. Often, schools are important arenas in shaping a child's formation of ethnic identity. Strong ethnic identity is especially important beyond primary grades, when the amount of English information that a student has to absorb becomes particularly evident.

Navajo students are facing an identity crisis because of the influence of western society on the Navajo Reservation. More and more young parents are not teaching the Navajo way of life. Navajo language and traditional ceremonies have become less significant. Elders see the changes in the younger generation, but they have hope of maintaining and sustaining the Navajo culture. Wilson Aronilth, a renowned elderly Navajo Medicine man and a cultural specialist who teaches at Diné College supports the Navajo Educational philosophy by stating;

Finally our great forefathers (hinizází dóó nihichóoni) said "Our language, philosophies, cultural education, and art work will never fade out or fade away. As long as we still have four parts of the day and four seasons, as long as we still have sunshine, rain, and snow and as long as the grass still grows, our education will remain. But if we ever begin to imitate and copy from someone else, then as humans, we will begin to fade away from our true image." There is always love and hope. If you and I have hope and understanding, we can all still maintain and protect our values. Let us hold on to our education, our true image, and true identity, while looking for the true principle of life. 15

Not many teachers and parents are aware that poetry can create and establish a bridge between cultural identity and learning English. Poetry written by Navajo poets and some Native American Poets are stories about being a Navajo and experiencing events as a Navajo. The Navajo term for poetry is *hane*' which means a story or narrative that is meant to be shared publicly. The narratives are intended to tell a story that link poetry to Navajo oral traditions, other traditions, history, and culture through the Navajo perspective. Most poets write to express and create identity.

English has become the prevalent language on the Navajo reservation due to influence of the western society through multimedia including movies, television, music, and magazines that promote "pop" culture. Many young adults and children have grown up speaking English as their primary Language. However, the English spoken at home is not fluent; rather "playground" English that encompasses slang and broken English (Code switching.) Some Navajo children use both the Navajo and English language simultaneously, but both words mean the same thing for example: *aoo*', meaning yes, *ti*' meaning let's go....When children speak informal English using the Navajo language patterns and parts of speech, it sounds incoherent in English. A majority of the students at elementary school fall into this category where their first language is English, yet they are not fluent speakers. These are the students who are often identified as English Language Learners.

Most of the English Language Learners in my class have been in the Structured English Immersion classes since Kindergarten. All students who are identified as English Language Learners are assessed for English language proficiency using a standard -based assessment called Arizona English Language Learner Assessment (AZELLA). The assessment is designed to test in the domain of listening, reading, writing, and

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speaking. Students in the program are assessed every year until they test proficient. Most student instruction is based on the proficiency skills using the AZELLA results. In most cases, students usually fall short in reading and writing.

The problem that most ELL students have with reading is vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. According to Koch, "in the excitement of reading the poems, the children were glad to learn the meanings of strange words, of old forms like *thee* and *thine*, and of strange conceptions like symmetry and sublunary." ¹⁶ Creating excitement for reading poetry will automatically entice children to learn the meaning of words. Reading fluency needs to be established before reading comprehension can develop. Reading fluency is the ability of a child to read text without any noticeable cognitive or mental effort. A student has to be able to demonstrate reading fluency by reading accurately, applying reliable components skills for reading, strategies for decoding, and vocabulary. When they start focusing more on constructing meaning from print, then the students are ready for comprehension. ¹⁷

Objectives

Students will recognize that Native American Poets, especially Navajo poets use poetry as a form of storytelling. Students will use knowledge of phonemic awareness by segmenting syllables in multi-syllabic words, especially with poems that rely on meters and stress to create a moment and create a feeling. Students will also identify words that the author selects in a poem or to create a rich auditory experience in a literary selection. Many of the Native American poets use prose. This is a good opportunity for students to practice fluency and accuracy. Students will comprehend text by identifying structural elements of poetry. Nursery Rhymes that the students used to recite in Kindergarten and first grade are rhyme poems that can help them develop rhythm and recognize rhyming words. In addition, students will compose a narrative by writing simple poetry, using rhythm, rhyme, similes and sensory details. Students will write poetry using any form to find a voice and to become confident writers. Listening and speaking confidently is also a major objective of this unit. To help establish speaking and listening with fluency, students will memorize and recite simple poems, sometimes in prose and sometimes in verse. Students will also be expected to learn how to sing one patriotic song of their choice.

Strategies

Listening and speaking requires comprehension of oral communications and delivery of oral communication. Students will practice delivery of oral communication by memorizing and reciting poems. "The National Anthem" and the "Star Spangle Banner" are poems they will practice and perform as a group, so the students get comfortable when speaking in class. Another strategy is to watch videos to help guide students with fluency speaking and porosity. The next step of reciting poetry is get students to perform individually. Individual performances will begin with nursery rhymes because I want to students to get familiar with the rhythm of nursery rhymes.

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Developing vocabulary is an important skill that can be developed during listening and speaking. Many of the strategies I use in this unit are from Marcia Brechtel's book, *Bringing it All Together*. One strategy to develop vocabulary skills is vertical sentence. The vertical sentence strategy requires students to identify words they do not know in a poem. The students will find synonyms and replace it with unknown words. The students will then recite the poem with the new synonym words. Vertical sentence also helps with comprehension. Another strategy for vocabulary development is the cognitive content dictionary (CCD). CCD dictionary, students divide a sheet of paper into four columns. The first column is for unknown words and word study like syllabication, word origins, affixes, and other word forms. In the second column, students predict the definition of the unknown word and use cognition (to think about how they connect to the unknown word). This column is especially important for students to develop the ability to look for context clues and a quick sketch helps students with imprinting the meaning. In the third column, students look up definition in a dictionary or on the internet. Students write the definition in terms they understand and remember, whether they use examples of pictures, or write down definition. In the final column, students write a sentence using the word.

Reading with fluency and accuracy are important skills for ELL students. Students are expected to read unfamiliar text with accuracy, appropriate phrasing, and attention to punctuation. An important strategy to help develop fluency and accuracy is to model reading. I model reading by reading every book and poem in this unit two to three times. Then I will choral read the text with students as a whole group, small group, and one on one. Echo reading is a fun strategy I use with the students or they practice with a partner. During echo reading, I will read a line in a familiar poem like "Mary had a Little Lamb," and the students will read the same line. Keep echoing until the poem is completely read. A variation to this strategy requires the first reader to change their voice like read in a deep voice, and the second reader copies the deep voice. I want the students to play with poems and reading passages to be familiar with the rhythm of reading with fluency and accuracy. Eventually, I want students to read independently using the acquired skills.

Comprehension in reading is also required. Using culture is especially important in developing comprehension skills because students will be able to make connection of text to self. Close reading is a great strategy for developing comprehension. During a close reading activity, students read a short passage or short story. The short story allows students to read the passage quickly, and may refer back to it to find answers. Reading books like *Songs from the Loom* ¹⁸ reveal how important rug weaving is to the Navajo culture. *The Goat in the Rug* ¹⁹ and *Wisdom Weaver* ²⁰ are short story that takes the readers through the process of shearing, washing the wool, spinning wool into yarn and eventually weave into a rug to show the care and pride of weaving a final product. The books are ideal for close reading because they are short and they support the unit by offering background information about weaving.

Writing is a difficult skill to develop with English Language Learners so I give the students ample opportunities to practice writing. Writing is hard to develop because students have trouble with Standard English conventions and structure. Students need to acquire grammar structure of the English Language to be proficient. Most students fail to meet proficiency standards because they perform poorly on the writing domain of ELP standards. Sentence Patterning Chart (SPN) strategy is a wonderful way to teach oral and written sentence fluency and grammar structure. Sentence Patterning Chart requires the use of a chart divided into columns. The first column is adjectives; the second is nouns, verb, adverb, and prepositional phrases. The sentence structures are manipulated into various sentence phrases and have the same meaning. I use the SPC with Farmer and the Dell chant and poetry frames to write poems. The Farmer and the Dell chant is strategy for practicing oral sentence fluency in poetry format. Using the SPC, students create a chant to the tune of Farmer and the Dell. The chant requires students to select two adjectives, one plural noun, one verb, one, adverb, and one prepositional phrase from SPC. Students sing the chant using adjective-noun in the

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first line, adjective-noun in the second line, adjective-adjective-noun-verb-adverb-prepositional phrase in the last line. For example, Farmer and Dell chant about a horse:

Fast Horses, Strong Horses, Fast strong horses race quickly in the desert.

Using "Here There" poetry frame is an extension strategy used with the SPC to assist students with creating a simple poem. The poetry frame requires students to be familiar and be able to use parts of speech to create a poem using color coded parts of speech. For example, I created the following horse poem using "Here There" poetry frame using SPC.

Horses Horses here, horses there, Horses, horses everywhere! Fast horse racing quickly, Strong horse working tirelessly, Black horse prancing proudly, and Wild horse bucking frantically. Horses in the desert, Horses in the meadow, Horses by the windmill, and Horses in the corral. Horses here, horses there, Horses, horses everywhere!

Activities

Structural Elements of a Poem

Students will identify the structural elements of a poetry including repetition, rhyme, rhythm, and verse. In this unit, students will be immersed to different kinds of poems. When the students begin the activity on patriotic poems, they will be exposed to poems that have multiple verses. Most people just learn one verse of an entire patriotic poem and my students will learn the entire poem. Students know that the "National Anthem" is one verse taken from "Star Spangle Banner." The poem by Frances Scott Key, "America the Beautiful," and "Stars and Stripes Forever" contains four verses in each poem. "This Land is Your Land" has seven verses. Download the complete verses from www.usa-flag-site.org to show students the other verses of the poems.

Rhymes and rhythm are important elements of a poem. Before beginning the next lesson, brainstorm with students about what grandmother means to them. Guide students to discuss weaving a rug and people who weave rugs. The Goat in the Rug by Nancy Winslow Parker and the poem Wisdom Weaver by Jann A. Johnson helps students understand the process and procedures of rug weaving. Then discuss the poetic patterns and rhythm of the poem. The main emphasis will be on how Navajos use sheep to sustain life, especially using the wool for rug weaving. Nursery Rhymes that mention sheep like Baa Baa Black Sheep, Little Boy Blue, and Mary Had a Little Lamb rhymes and repetition are addition poem resources students will use. Reading the nursery rhymes to identify the rhymes and repetition in the poem and how it creates a rhythm helps students to use modalities. Students will recite a Nursery Rhyme of their choice, with fluency and with rhythm.

Delivery of a Patriotic Poem

The objective of the activity is for students to recite and present a poem using appropriate rhythm, rate, phrasing and expression. I will introduce patriotism by reading the poem *That American Flag* by Luci Tapahonso. I will lead the students in a discussion about the meaning of the poem. I want students to realize that the poem is about the trials and tribulation of the Navajo people. To the Navajos, the American Flag

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represents endurance and survival of their ancestors during The Long Walk, a poignant time in Navajo History. Today the Navajo people demonstration patriotism by opening cultural events and celebrations with a flag ceremony.

I will facilitate a discussion with the students about an opening flag ceremony that they have witnessed during a cultural event. I will ask students about songs, poems and chants they heard as part of the opening ceremony. Then I will lead the students to discuss and interpret the meaning of "The Pledge of Allegiance" and "The National Anthem." Students will learn these poems represent freedom and patriotism for all people.

Reciting the "Pledge of Allegiance" and "The National Anthem" requires a special rhythm, rate, and phrasing. Students will use a YouTube video to view a performance of the "National Anthem" and use it as guidance to deliver the poem with appropriate rhythm, rate, and phrasing. The two poems are recited daily to practice oral reading fluency as a whole class until they are able to perform them without the aid of the video. Students are divided into four groups and each group will select another patriotic poem such as "America the Beautiful," "God Bless America," "This Land is Your Land," or "Stars and Stripes Forever." Again, the students will practice in small groups with the aid of a YouTube video to practice rhythm, rate, and phrasing. The students will perform the patriotic poem at the end of the unit.

Write a Simple Poem

In this activity, the objective is for students to write a simple poem using rhythm, and rhyme. A PowerPoint with pictures from Shiprock Fair includes images of the parade, Navajo social song and dance, Pow-wow, Indian Market, carnival, and rodeo and will be used so students are able to produce a simple poem. I will guide students to develop language skills by using a Sentence Patterning Chart (SPC). With guidance, the students will discuss the pictures and complete the SPC by describing the picture with adjectives, verbs, adverbs, nouns, and prepositional phrase. Students will identify the nouns, and actions of the people in the story. Using the SPC, the students will create an oral chant to the tune of *The Farmer in the Dell*. The chant will allow the students to practice sentence rhythm. Once they establish the rhythm of sentence fluency and sentence structure, I will introduce "Here, There" poetry frame. The students will create a poem using "Here, There" poetry frame.

Appendices

Arizona English Language Proficiency Standards are prerequisite language skills for English Language Learners to teach academic content. The standards are organized within Listening and Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Language strands. I organized the unit to include every domain and strand in Arizona ELP standards to help my students develop English Language Skills.

Listening and Speaking Domain: The standard states that the students will express orally his or her own thinking and ideas by presenting and reciting poems, chants, and tongue twisters with appropriate rhythm, rate, phrasing and expression. Participation in reciting patriotic poems, Nursery Rhymes, and Farmer and the Dell chant are strategies used to meet the standards.

Reading Domain: In reading, the students will comprehend text by analyzing text by identifying structural elements of poetry. In this unit, students apply the standard by identifying repetition in various poems,

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emulating rhyme and rhythm of poems, and reading verses.

Writing Domain: Under writing application, students will express his or her ideas by writing a simple poetry using rhythm, rhyme, and sensory details. Students will use poetry frame to assist with poetry writing. The five senses will be utilized to describe in detail what students experience at Shiprock Fair.

Language Strand: The strands for language are embedded in the three domains. The main focus of the Language strands is to utilize vocabulary and grammar. Grammar is important for oral and written language structure. Students practice language skills throughout the unit.

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