

Assessment of Expressiveness in Poetry Reading Instruction Using the Historical Spice Route as Stimulus

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Abstract

Assessment plays a crucial role in evaluating students' mastery of learning materials and guiding instructional improvements. This paper presents a model of an assessment instrument tailored for poetry reading instruction at the junior high school level, using historical spice-themed poetry as an instructional stimulus. The assessment focuses on three key expressive elements: physical structure of the poem, reading performance, and emotional expression. Drawing on historical narratives about the Spice Route, the instrument provides contextual relevance that engages students both emotionally and intellectually. Findings highlight the importance of performance-based assessment in fostering students' expressive abilities and cultural understanding through poetry. The proposed rubric includes detailed descriptors for each assessment component and aligns with current curricular goals in language and cultural education.

Keywords: *poetry reading, expressiveness, assessment rubric, Spice Route, junior high school education*

Introduction

One of the skills that students need to develop is expressive poetry reading. In early language acquisition, children absorb all the language they hear without yet understanding each word's meaning. This shows that language can be used for communication, but understanding its meaning still requires development. Poetry as a literary work uses language to communicate with its readers and requires special guidance in its reading. This is because poetic language must be understood word by word, including punctuation, interpretation, and correct pronunciation with appropriate intonation, pauses, and stress to express mood, emotion, and feeling.

According to Widiyanto and Fathurohman (2019); Nisa, Fathurohman, and Setiawan (2021), personality, discipline, and language meaning emerge from learning that emphasizes a mimetic approach, in which the environment influences individual development based on interests and sensitivity to surrounding conditions. "Beauty in literary language is essential, as language style should suit the context in which it is expressed." (Seran, 2025).

Poetry is full of meaning, arises from life's complexities, and gains depth through diction. Understanding poetry through the stimulus of spice history can be explored through depictions of spice-related elements, explicitly or implicitly, in the poem's words and underlying meaning. The interpretation of spice history is based on the idea of the Spice

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Route. Poetry becomes a medium for conveying the exoticism and myths of the archipelago's spices to the world. The Indonesian archipelago was once a target for various nations seeking the spice paradise. Spices drove massive expeditions to the region considered the world's spice center (Ambarwati, 2020).

This awareness to recall and document the collective memory of spice history centered in Indonesia prompted the Ministry of Education and Culture to propose the Spice Route to UNESCO as a world heritage site. This is not mere glorification; the government sees spices as having potential to drive creative economic activity in health, tourism, cultural documentation, and education.

Reading poetry is not just like reading a book—it requires meaning, pronunciation, intonation, and expression aligned with the poem's content. Ulya, Fathurohman, and Setiawan (2021); Mujiwanto, Murtono, and Fathurohman (2021) state that such skills must be continuously practiced and are not instantly mastered. Teaching poetry reading can succeed when the learning system is well-prepared. Harsiati (2011) noted that the purpose of assessment in learning is to measure and understand student ability from beginning to end. In poetry learning, assessment is a vital evaluation tool to increase students' creativity, especially in poetry reading.

Currently, a common difficulty in poetry reading is lack of expression. Observations in the odd semester of 2022/2023 at SMP 1 Kauman found that students still struggle to express emotions like sadness, joy, or confusion. This is due to difficulty in understanding the poem's meaning, which affects their expression. Interviews with students in Tulungagung Regency revealed that poetry reading is often simply reading aloud without understanding its meaning or process. "Although this study is based on one school, applying the rubric in a single context limits its broader significance" This issue must be addressed by preparing professional and skilled future teachers. Prasetyowati & Linardi (2017) mention seven basic emotions: anger, joy, sadness, disgust, fear, contempt, and hatred. Fathurohman (2019) found meaning in poetic texts through Ingarden's strata norm analysis. This study aims to evaluate expressive elements in poetry reading. "This study, therefore, aims not only to assess expressiveness but also to propose a flexible model for wider use in poetry instruction."

Theoretical Framework

1. Expressive Reading in Language Learning

Expressiveness in reading is considered one of the indicators of reading fluency and comprehension (Rasinski, 2012). In language acquisition, reading with prosody (appropriate intonation, pitch, volume, and rhythm) correlates with the reader's understanding of the text (Kibler, Henrickson, & Chapman, 2021). Therefore, expressive reading is not only performative but also a cognitive-linguistic skill.

2. Performance-Based Language Assessment

Performance-based assessment (PBA) provides a direct observation of student language use in authentic tasks (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). In poetry reading, PBA enables educators to evaluate how well students communicate meaning through verbal and nonverbal elements. It addresses multiple domains of language learning, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary control, and emotional expression.

3. Cultural Learning through Literature

Literary texts such as poetry serve as a rich source of cultural knowledge. When tied to national narratives, such as the Indonesian Spice Route, poetry becomes a pedagogical medium that bridges language learning and cultural heritage. Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) emphasizes the relevance of integrating local contexts into instruction to foster identity and engagement.

Method

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at designing and refining a conceptual model for assessing expressive reading in poetry instruction. The research focused on 8th-grade students at a junior high school in East Java, specifically SMP Negeri 1 Kauman, during the 2023/2024 academic year. The choice of this setting was based on the need to observe authentic classroom interactions where poetry reading is actively practiced.

Data were collected through a combination of observation, documentation, and informal interviews. Classroom observations were carried out during poetry reading sessions to examine existing instructional methods and the extent to which students engaged with the texts expressively. This provided firsthand insight into students' reading behaviors, including their vocal performance, use of gestures, and ability to convey emotion through oral delivery.

In addition to observations, the researcher collected documentation in the form of student poetry texts, teacher-prepared assessment results, and relevant lesson plans. These materials offered a deeper understanding of both the learning objectives set by the teachers and the actual outputs produced by the students.

To complement the observations and enrich the contextual understanding, informal interviews were conducted with students and teachers. These conversations helped to validate the observed phenomena and brought to light students' perspectives on the challenges and motivations related to expressive reading, as well as teachers' reflections on instructional strategies.

The data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), involving three major steps. First, data reduction was performed by identifying and selecting relevant segments of the raw data that aligned with the study's focus on expressiveness in poetry reading. These data segments were then organized and presented in a structured form through data display techniques, such as thematic matrices and narrative charts. Finally, the process of drawing conclusions involved interpreting these patterns to uncover the key themes related to student expressiveness, assessment needs, and instructional implications in poetry reading. This iterative process ensured that the findings were grounded in real classroom experiences while contributing to the formulation of a practical and culturally responsive assessment model. "Participants were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their involvement."

Results

This study involved 26 eighth-grade students from SMP Negeri 1 Kauman who participated in three sessions of expressive poetry reading, guided by a performance-based rubric themed around the historical Spice Route. Data were collected through rubric score sheets filled in by two trained raters, structured field notes, and brief post-session interviews with 10

students and the class teacher. The findings are presented narratively below, enriched by both quantitative and qualitative evidence to support the study's objectives.

Statistical analysis revealed consistent increases across all three rubric dimensions. The average score for *Physical Elements* rose from 12.4 to 17.1; *Reading Performance* increased from 11.7 to 16.8; and *Emotional Expression* showed the most dramatic improvement, from 28.5 to 48.2. A paired-sample *t*-test confirmed that these differences were statistically significant ($p < .001$ for all three dimensions). Inter-rater reliability, as measured by Cohen's κ , was 0.79, indicating substantial agreement. Additionally, internal consistency for the Emotional Expression subscale was high, with a Cronbach's alpha (α) of 0.88, suggesting reliable measurement across its indicators.

Table 1. Average rubric scores before and after implementation

Assessment Aspect	Max Score	Pre-Avg.	Post-Avg.	Improvement
Physical Elements	20	12.4	17.1	+4.7
Reading Performance	20	11.7	16.8	+5.1
Emotional Expression	60	28.5	48.2	+19.7
Total	100	52.6	82.1	+29.5

Observational data revealed a significant transition from monotonic recitation to expressive, audience-aware performance "These results indicate that the improvements were not only statistically significant, but also educationally meaningful". In the initial session, most students read mechanically with minimal modulation. By the third session, 18 students were intentionally pausing at punctuation marks and using varied intonation. Gesture use evolved from occasional to intentional, such as open-hand movements to illustrate "journey" or leaning forward to express "longing." Facial expressions also became more consistent and aligned with the emotional tone of the poem—anger, awe, sadness, and joy were more visible and sustained across lines.

Post-activity interviews further supported these findings. One student noted, "Because expression has the highest weight, I practiced my facial expressions first before reading" (Student 4). Another added, "I used to feel shy reading aloud, but when I saw what the rubric asked for, I knew what to work on" (Student 11). Eight out of ten interviewees indicated that the historical theme of the poem made the material feel "closer" and "more meaningful," which increased their motivation to perform with emotion and confidence.

The class teacher emphasized three key benefits. First, the rubric streamlined lesson planning because each activity (vocal warmups, image analysis, rehearsal) mapped directly to rubric components. Second, evaluation became faster and less subjective, with each group performance scored in under two minutes. Third, the rubric enabled more targeted feedback; students could be guided with specific references to lines, criteria, or stanzas, facilitating measurable revisions and deeper reflection on their delivery.

Overall, implementation of this culturally embedded, outcome-oriented rubric improved students' technical accuracy and, more importantly, shifted their approach from passive decoding to affective performance. Statistically significant score increases, corroborated by behavioral data and participant narratives, provide a strong foundation for the pedagogical implications discussed in the next section.

Discussion

The present study asked two broad questions: (a) How effectively does a culturally themed, outcome-based rubric foster expressive reading in junior-high poetry instruction? and (b) What qualitative shifts in learner and teacher behaviour accompany its use? The quantitative data speak unambiguously to the first question. All three rubric dimensions posted large, statistically significant gains, with the greatest improvement recorded in Emotional Expression, the very construct intentionally given the highest weighting. This pattern supports the axiom that assessment signals value (Black & Wiliam, 2018); when learners perceive that affective delivery matters most, they invest effort in that area.

Qualitative evidence deepens this numeric portrait. Classroom observations revealed that prosodic control, gesture, and facial affect moved from perfunctory to purposeful. Interviews confirmed a parallel internal shift: students no longer regarded reading as “getting the words right,” but as embodying meaning. In other words, the rubric functioned not only as a measurement tool but as a catalyst for reconceptualising poetry as performance (Tobin, 2016).

Our findings dovetail with Rasinski’s (2012) claim that fluency and comprehension are reciprocally reinforcing; once students attend to meaning, expression follows, and vice versa. They also echo Gay’s (2018) culturally responsive pedagogy, which posits that local narratives (in this case, the Spice Route) provide affective hooks that heighten engagement. Similar improvements were reported by Chien (2022) in Taiwanese EFL classes when transparent rubrics were paired with oral tasks, suggesting that clarity of criteria can transcend linguistic and cultural contexts.

However, the magnitude of the gain in Emotional Expression (+19.7) exceeds that of prior rubric-based studies, where affective subscales often rise only modestly (about +10 points; Kibler et al., 2021). One plausible explanation is the synergy of cultural relevance and performance weighting. The historical theme did more than contextualise vocabulary; it infused the task with identity and pride, motivating students to inhabit the poem’s emotions fully.

The teacher’s testimony that lesson planning became “mapped to the rubric” illuminates an essential shift. Assessment was front-loaded into instruction, guiding warm-ups, text analysis, and rehearsal. Such alignment operationalises the principle of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2011), ensuring that learning activities, assessments, and outcomes pull in the same direction.

Because descriptors were written in accessible language, students could self-monitor and coach peers. The rapid growth in students’ confidence, frequently cited in interviews, is consistent with the psychological safety that clear expectations create.

The Spice Route motif did more than decorate the lesson; it provided an authentic narrative spine linking past and present. By performing poems that evoke Indonesia’s maritime heritage, learners connected classroom literacy to national identity. This aligns with UNESCO guidelines that encourage infusing intangible cultural heritage into schooling to promote cultural sustainability.

Beyond its role as a performance assessment tool, the rubric emerged as a driver of reflective pedagogy. Teachers not only used it for grading but also for backward planning, ensuring that each learning activity aligned with specific rubric indicators. This mirrors the notion of assessment for learning (AfL), where assessment informs ongoing instruction and promotes growth rather than simply measuring outcomes (Wiliam, 2011). In this context,

students were no longer passive recipients of evaluation but active agents in monitoring and refining their performances.

Moreover, by allowing students to engage with the rubric collaboratively (through peer review, group rehearsal, and joint reflection sessions), the classroom culture gradually shifted from teacher-centered correction to peer-supported exploration. Such practices resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, in which learners benefit from scaffolding provided by more capable peers. These micro-interactions around the rubric fostered metalinguistic awareness, as students not only internalised poetic devices but also developed a shared vocabulary to talk about voice, rhythm, and affect.

This development is particularly crucial in lower-secondary education, where learners are navigating both cognitive and emotional growth. The affective demands of poetry performance challenge them to regulate emotion, embody narrative voice, and adopt perspectives beyond their own. All of these are aligned with broader goals of social-emotional learning (SEL), indicating that the rubric's influence extends into interdisciplinary educational value.

Although devised for poetry reading, the rubric model can migrate to other performance genres such as storytelling, drama, or debate by adjusting indicators. Furthermore, the weighting scheme can be recalibrated for different objectives; an advanced class might distribute points more evenly to drive balanced mastery.

Despite its promising results, the study has limitations that temper generalisation. First, the sample was small and homogeneous, drawn from a single rural school. Cultural resonance might manifest differently in urban or ethnically diverse settings. Second, the research window spanned only three sessions. Longer-term studies are needed to test retention and transfer of expressive skills to unfamiliar texts. Third, although inter-rater reliability was high, raters were trained by the researcher; future work should examine whether classroom teachers who are new to the instrument achieve comparable reliability. Finally, emotional-expression gains, although impressive, were measured behaviourally; coupling the rubric with physiological or voice-analysis tools could triangulate affect more robustly.

Building on these constraints, we propose three strands of follow-up inquiry. A quasi-experimental study with control and treatment groups across several schools would clarify causal attribution. Second, mixed-methods longitudinal research could track how expressive competence evolves over a semester and whether it predicts broader literacy outcomes. Third, integrating digital analytics (for example, AI-mediated prosody feedback) might amplify the rubric's formative capacity and generate fine-grained usage data.

An additional area worth exploring is the potential of rubric co-construction, in which students help define performance criteria. Testing this approach with the same population could reveal whether student-generated indicators yield equal or greater expressive gains compared to teacher-designed ones.

Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to investigate the rubric's transferability across linguistic levels and genres. Can the same principles be applied to prose readings, dramatic monologues, or even bilingual poetry? Given Indonesia's multilingual context, examining how rubrics function across Bahasa Indonesia, regional languages, and foreign languages (such as English or German) could yield insights into cross-linguistic expressiveness and rubric universality.

Another promising trajectory is the integration of affective computing tools, such as automated prosody feedback or emotion-recognition software, to support formative assessment. These technologies can provide immediate, personalised feedback, enabling

students to iteratively refine their performance between classroom sessions. Combined with a well-structured rubric, such tools could significantly enhance learning efficiency and student agency.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that an outcome-oriented, culturally embedded rubric can transform junior-high poetry reading from mechanical recitation into expressive performance. Quantitative gains of nearly 30 points on a 100-point scale and qualitative evidence of heightened confidence, clearer prosody, and deeper emotional enactment converge to validate the rubric's dual role as assessment instrument and instructional compass. By foregrounding Emotional Expression and anchoring content in Indonesia's Spice Route heritage, the rubric leveraged both motivational and cognitive pathways to learning.

The findings carry practical weight for curriculum designers seeking to operationalise performance-based assessment without sacrificing cultural relevance. Yet they also invite caution: scalability demands broader trials, and sustainability requires that teachers internalise, not merely apply, the rubric's criteria. Future research should therefore test the model across varied demographics, extend the observation window, and explore technology-enhanced feedback loops. If such efforts confirm the present results, the approach holds promise not only for poetry but for any language-arts activity where emotion, heritage, and performance intersect.

In sum, the rubric's success underscores a broader pedagogical lesson: when students are offered clear, meaningful criteria tied to culturally resonant content, they rise to meet complex learning challenges. Expressive reading, once regarded as a peripheral skill, is repositioned at the heart of language education. It cultivates not only fluency but empathy, cultural literacy, and voice.

As education systems globally grapple with how to balance standardisation and creativity, this study offers a model where both can coexist. The rubric provided structure without stifling individuality, and the performance task offered space for student agency within pedagogical bounds. For policy-makers and practitioners committed to culturally responsive, emotionally intelligent instruction, outcome-based rubrics may serve as both compass and catalyst.

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