Learning language skills through poetry

ASSOCIATE PROF. ADAM.M.ABDELKADIR / OMAR AL MUKHTAR UNIVERSITY /
FACULTY OF LANGUAGES / English language department / SHAHAT /
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Abstract:

Poetry is an efficacious source that can effectively be used in teaching English language to improve students’ English language skills, including grammar and vocabulary. It deals with human interest, universal themes and offers chances for learners to express their feelings and emotions. Also poetry can play a significant role in language learning in general and English poems can be used in the language classrooms for effective language learning in our universities.

Of course there are some of the difficulties may the teachers face while teaching English through poetry, like the students’ proficiency level and what kind of methods can the teachers use while teaching and the chosen poetry texts. Thus, this paper aims to explore the advantages and challenges of teaching English through poetry to students in our universities in Libya, through which suggestions will be made for teachers in selecting poetry materials for English language teaching, in addition to other suggested teaching methods for students of English departments. So in this respect, this study provides an important insight into the use of poetry as a successful tool in teaching languages.

Keywords: Teaching poetry, language skills, emotional abilities, linguistic model, language teaching, poetry analysis, motivation, literary expression, rhythmic tone, expand literary vocabulary knowledge.
كما أن الشعر دوراً مهماً في تعلم اللغة بشكل عام ويمكن استخدام القصائد الإنجليزية في فصول اللغة لتعلم اللغة بشكل فعال في جامعنا. بدون شك، فإن هناك بعض الصعوبات التي قد يواجهها المعلموون أثناء تدريس مادة اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال الشعر هو مستوى إتقان الطلاب وطريقة المعلمين في التدريس ونصوص الشعر المختارة.

الشعر مادة فعالة ومهمة في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية لأنا توفر فرصًا مذهلة لمارسات القراءة والكتابة والتحدث والاستماع لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية. ينصح تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال الشعر بالعديد من المواد مثل كتب مادة أصيلة، وتكوين وسيلة للتعبير عن المشاعر والعواطف لأنا تحتوي على مواد أدبية وثقافية رائعة وتساعد وتساهم في قدرة الطالب على تحسين المهارات اللغوية.

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استكشاف مزايا تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال الشعر وتحدياتها للطلاب في جامعنا في ليبيا، والتي سيتم من خلالها تقديم اقتراحات لاختيار المواد الشعرية من أجل تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، بالإضافة إلى طرق التدريس الأخرى المبتكرة لطلاب أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم الشعر، المهارات اللغوية، القدرة العاطفية، النموذج اللغوي، تدريس اللغة، تحليل الشعر، التحفيز، التعبير الأدبي، اللغة الإيقاعية، توسيع معرفة المفردات الأدبية.

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Introduction

This study focuses on the methods or approaches of teaching authentic poetry texts using English as a language of instruction. Poetry texts should be appropriately integrated with specific language skills as indicated by the learning outcome of the language's four skills. This means that texts of poetry should be taught and learned in English in an attempt to enhance these skills holistically.

There are two concepts used in teaching poetry methods as Lazar, G. [9], define these methods as "restrictive, rigid procedure established and favoured by support of a specific view of language learning or teaching". They further define this approach as "a more open–minded attitude to language learning or teaching, an outlook that changes with the circumstances". (p.6). These quotes contrast methods with approaches of language learning and teaching. However, these concepts are used interchangeably by the author and such methods or approaches of teaching poetry are examined in detail in this study. Brindley, D. J. [3], defines poetry as "The honey of all flowers". (p.67). This implies that poetry should be appreciated and be enjoyed. The quote implies that poetry appeals to all individuals in all spheres of life. However, the methods through which this genre is to be taught and learned are not specified in any regulations or policies, especially in our English language curriculum.

We always wonder if poetry can play any significant role in language learning in general and whether English poems can be used in the language classrooms for effective language learning for English Language students in Libyan universities. Poetry can at times be seen as a daunting task for English language learners, specifically more alienated in the EFL/ESL contexts.

1-PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To investigate methods of poetry teaching used in English departments in our universities and to determine the methods employed by teachers when teaching poetry. Also to establish how students may respond to the effective methods of poetry teaching.
2-Methodology

The methods of teaching poetry to English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners are not stipulated in any existing educational curriculum. This means that teachers do not have guidelines on what methods to employ when teaching poetry. Therefore, the study sets out to look into methods which encourage learner’s voices to be heard. Some methods used to teach poetry have been rejected. For example, Bright, J., and McGregor, G. [2] rejected the idea of teachers’ second-hand comments, notes and prepared answers for examination purposes. Such methods were criticized as stereotyped and anti-educational in the sense that teachers may impose their own ideas as the absolute truth without acknowledging the learner’s opinions. As it knows poetry lends itself to self-expression and different interpretations. Therefore, the methods teachers use when teaching poetry become important.

When we look at poetry in our English departments, our major concern with regard to analysis and interpretation of a poem should be grounded on firm historical and linguistic details, so as no one is able to impose on us what should read.

Poetry should not mean to us that all the poems written in a language, but a language art that has its distinctive parameters and devices. It is the teacher’s job to make the students aware of the parameters and give them practice in recognizing and interpreting the devices so that the fullest possible experience of poetry may be achieved. As Alex Rodger,[11], has observed, "our primary duty is not so much the teaching of knowledge about literature as the imparting of skill in the recognition and comprehension of literary modes of meaning", (p.87). So we may say, all language arts of poetry makes up reality in terms of linguistic images cause it does not deal directly with objects. It proceeds incrementally along the axis of time; the content of the entire poem is not present at once and does not remain directly in view for as long as one likes, in this aspect, it is different from all other kinds of arts.
3-The value of teaching poetry in foreign languages

The poetic tidy language syllabuses, with carefully graded structures and vocabulary, has made some teachers question the wisdom of teaching poetry to the students of English departments in our universities. They say that all merely ornamental, unessential material must go and suggest that poetry can be justified on sentimental and traditional grounds only. They speak of vagueness, unusual word order, poetic diction, few words where one could his sentimental creations, such as Alexander Pope, when he expressed his emotions and said, "For hearts so touched, so pierced, so lost as mine", from the poem that entitled, Eloisa to Abelard, or "Your heart is soft as a stone in the ocean". It is impossible to deny that these words apply to a great deal of the poetry which is used in language teaching at Western Universities at present and if that were the only material available no sensible person would disagree with this verdict. Even those who might wish to dispute this view of poetry and insist on its retention must take these objections seriously enough to let some of the old favorites of the classroom go and justify the inclusion of what they feel. They can defend for its terseness, urgency, natural speech rhythms and strikingly memorable phrases. This is quite possible if we look for material among traditional songs and rhymes that have stood the criticism of generations and reject everything which diffuse, sentimental and trivial.

A- Suggestions for the selection of poetry texts in teaching English

The selection of the poetry texts is a chief element in the process of teaching English. Indeed, the appropriate selection of poetry texts that meets the teaching objectives is a challenge that teachers face in teaching English through poetry. Poetry could play a vital role in teaching English if it is well-selected. According to Panavelil, [10], “a teacher should be extremely careful while choosing the text that he/she wants to deal with in the classroom. The needs of the students, their motivation, interest, and cultural background should be taken into consideration while selecting a poem for classroom teaching.”, (p.112 ). Teachers should introduce modern and lucid poems. They should also consider other criteria such as clarity of topic, simplicity of language, and contextual aspects while selecting poetry texts.
Then he/she should discuss the selection of poetry texts (poems) based on linguistic, conceptual and cultural aspects.

B- Poetry and human life experience

The poet writes a poem to express objectively and achieve catharsis through a strongly felt emotion aroused by and given meaning through some experience or suffering. If he does not feel strongly about the experience, he is unlikely to write a poem or at any rate the poem, Hess, N. [8], says, "if it is written for the sake of writing a poem rather than to crystallize out an attitude to an experience – will not, according to this view, be a very compelling or vital one", (p.212 ). The poem is similar to pearl created in the oyster-shell as a result of an irritation or disturbance but it is not only a creation its own right, it normally embodies an objective picture or reproduction of the event or disturbance which gave rise to it, presented in such a way that the reader can experience the event and the emotion connected with it and thereby achieve catharsis by facing the poet's predicament, with him, through the imagination.

The emotion in a good poem is normally heightened and the experience made vivid and memorable with the help of striking imagery, rhythm, rhyme and devices of pattern and arrangement, condensation and contrast which make it possible to include a great deal more information and imaginatively realized experience in a few lines than could normally be crammed into as many pages of a prose narrative.

C- Methods and models in teaching poetry in the language classes

While analyzing and teaching poetry, or any piece of literature, teachers may base their practices in different theoretical new stylistic approaches and how may the students response to them. These approaches almost have no place for the reader or any social context of literary texts. New criticism purports the importance of any literary text with an objective stance, and structuralism high analysis in literary reading, Collie, J, Slater, S. [4].

However, students' personal involvement, enhancement of cultural awareness and development of language skills are basic considerations for many teachers while
using literary texts in the language classes. Hence, these approaches are not referred to while creating the proposed framework here as they may fall short behind in invoking an interest of students in a foreign language classroom. The latter two theoretical approaches, on the other hand, offer practical applications in foreign language teaching since they value the reader and his/her experiences with the language of the text for meaning making. One of them is the stylistic approach directed at analyzing formal features of a poem at various linguistic levels including vocabulary, grammar, discourse and phonology. This approach fits within the purposes of language instruction in many L2 contexts to teach formal aspects of the English language and create language awareness.

4-Aim and Significance of the Study

Success of language learning and literary understanding largely depends on teacher’s scaffolding. Teachers can appreciate the use of literary texts for language teaching when training opportunities are provided. Widdowson, H. G. [13], (p.208), reports feelings of anxiety on the part of the teachers while using poetry in their classes, and urge training preserves teachers on how to teach poetry for transformation of hesitation into motivation. While many scholars such, [8-1-6-5], have offered differing opinions on matters of poetry teaching in various ways, we believe that following the above mentioned steps would be a very clear way of approaching the issue of teaching poetry, especially in terms of making it a site for contesting the battle of language proficiency for the students in the English departments in our universities in Libya.

This study proposes a framework with the aim of incorporating poetry in language teacher education, and it explores how prospective teachers perceive the use of such framework for language teaching purposes. Poems are valuable resources to be used while teaching language, and helping teachers reflect on such experience lay at the heart of the framework. Steps of the proposed framework may include practices familiar to foreign language teachers in different contexts. What is original about this framework is that it is specifically designed for incorporating poetry, rather than literature in general. Moreover, it offers a comprehensive and
systematic guide for teacher to follow with various alternative practices while using poetry in a language classes. The main aim here is to foster motivation for using poetry in the language class. In this study, the proposed framework helps poetry integrate the ideas of using it in teaching in different contexts. The following research questions are asked to explore the effectiveness of the framework as a tool for teacher education:

- What are the opinions about poetry framework designed for integrating poetry into language teaching?
- How do teachers reflect on using poetry for teaching purposes based on their actual teaching performances?

5- The Need for This Study

This study is unique because of the way in which it draws on students’ perspectives regarding their experiences with poetry as a mean to describe successful instructional techniques and in turn, improves pedagogical practice. In fact, there is already a notable body of literature highlighting the value of using student perspectives to improve practice. In his research, Stickling, Sara. [12], discussed how knowing more about students’ experiences is critically important in efforts to improve pedagogy. He asserts that “student participation in the reform process is integral to realizing successful outcomes. Efforts to gather information from students themselves should become part of the school improvement process and reform designs” (p. 341).

Then the students were pleased because they were able to identify important themes from their input and they pointed out that well-informed teachers who guided their navigation through difficult material were critical to a positive learning experience. In addition, students reported that instruction was most effective when it is active, engaging, and meaningful.

Overall, the research demonstrated a very plain fact which shows the students’ perceptions about what works in the classes are not only similar to what
the experts tell them, but also hold the key to fostering higher levels of engagement and comprehension.

And finally, there are numerous studies that discuss the significance of teaching the composition of poetry. In essence, the research shows that students benefit in myriad ways when afforded the opportunity to think about and read poetry without an overabundance of restrictions. Sherri, Faver. [7], underscores this point through a description of poetry workshops. “A poetry workshop can present opportunities to integrate students’ knowledge and perspectives in classroom contexts, encouraging the use of language for expression, communication, learning and even empowerment” (p. 70). She reflects that the workshop experience functions on both artistic and academic levels, encouraging “students to contribute to the classroom learning context and engage critically with ideas ... relevant to their lives” (p. 70). In other words, allowing students to work directly with poetry with the power will results in significant and positive learning outcomes.

So, we may say that, poetry is considered appropriate for second language learning especially when we talk about grammar and communication skills. Poetry serves not only a model of literature but a model for teaching skills of language as reading and writing. Poetry can be an effective way of language teaching. The student can easily relate structures and themes with the help of poetry.

Conclusions

Poetry is a reliable material to develop the students’ language and literary skills. However, teachers face challenges while teaching English through poetry. These challenges can be viewed in three aspects: firstly, the student’s proficiency level, secondly, the teacher’s teaching method and thirdly, the selection of the poetry text. Teachers have to keep pace with changes of the modern age and update their methods, whereas the text should be carefully selected to match students’ needs, interests, linguistic abilities and their cultural background.

It is evident that poetry can become part of language teaching methodology especially when it becomes accessible to teacher and they may feel more motivated to use poems while teaching a foreign language. So, the lack of training on using
literature as part of language teaching methodology may creates a tendency to underestimate the role of poetry as EFL teaching contexts.

The importance of this research evidence to offer ways to integrate literature in a language classroom, focuses on

- how to use literature for language teaching purposes,
- how teachers on the effective implementation of literary texts, are still questions unanswered. In this respect, this study provides insight into the use of poetry as a tool to train prospective language teachers. More research is undeniably required to investigate the effectiveness of similar models or frameworks to foster the incorporation of literature into language teaching curricula.

Poetry offers wonderful opportunities for reading, writing, speaking, and listening practice for ELLs. Poetry also gives students a chance to expand vocabulary knowledge, to play with language, and to work with different rhythms and rhyme patterns. Getting students to think about poems they are familiar with can help make the transition into English-language poetry smoother. Working with poetry from different countries and languages is also an excellent opportunity to encourage students to share their cultural heritage with the class, and to take pride in an art form that is part of their identity and may have been passed down across many generations.

Only few studies considered investigating the use of poetry in some of the English department settings yet they were mostly focused on the techniques and approaches implemented by teachers in using literature components like poetry to teach English. Therefore, this study was carried out as an effort to analyze the success of the use of poetry and collaborative poetry learning in enhancing English language acquisition among English language students in terms of their oral performance, writing skills and their attitude in language learning.
REFERENCES


