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The miraculous power of poetry as a language teaching device in EFL classes

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Abstract

This paper examines the how and why of using poetry in EFL classes as a language teaching device. First it identifies those features of poetry which provide educational and linguistic opportunities for teachers and learners. It then explains the difficulties that teachers and learners may encounter in using poetry in their classes. The author argues that if poetry is to be used as a source of instruction and enjoyment in classes, it must be carefully selected and presented in a way that promotes an authentic interaction between the reader and the poem. And lastly, by providing some sample pieces of poetry, the author tries to introduce a model for the beneficial incorporation of poetry in EFL classes.

Key words: Communication – interaction – pedagogical implication – language teaching device – association – literary experiment

Introduction

The use of literature in general and poetry in particular as a vehicle of instruction in EFL classes, has caused several controversies over the logic and results of the issue. Most teachers have reported their failure and lack of success, in trying to incorporate literature as part of the curricular materials. Nonetheless, there have been a few cases of satisfaction and success too. Thus the first question is whether poetry should be included in EFL classes or not.

Linguists such as Topping (1968) argue that literature should be excluded from ESL curriculum because of structural complexity, lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules, and remote cultural perspective. In the opposite camp, Povey (1967) believes that the linguistic difficulties of literature have been overstated; readers do not need to experience total comprehension to gain something from a text.

Bradford Arthur (1968) introduces literature as a potential source of teaching structure, vocabulary and culture.

In real life situation poetry is used extensively for a variety of purposes. It is used for entertainment and instruction. People read poetry to learn and enjoy. Reading poetry is a pleasant experience. The fact that poetry provides part of the authentic material of each language and the fact that it is used as a source of pleasure and enjoyment persuades us to find ways of incorporating it in the EFL classes.

1. Potentialities of Poetry

Listening to poetry is pleasing. The musical rhythm and rhyme of the poetry appeal to the auditory sense creating an auditory effect for the listeners. Poetry recited by fluent natives with proper accent and intonation is stimulating and interesting. Teachers can use different versions of the recited poems to create an influential atmosphere in the class. They can provide a dramatic reading of the poem by themselves.

Poetry deals with themes and topics which are intrinsically interesting for the readers and treats those subjects in ways designed to engage the readers. The themes presented by poems are universal themes –death, love, separation, eternity, belief, nature.... They talk about experiences common to all human beings at any place and any time.

When we read a poem, we get emotionally and intellectually involved. We lose our consciousness and awareness and enter a higher elevated transcendental world. We enter a new world which is created in a piece of poem. This kind of emotional and intellectual involvement is unique in itself. Our intellect and emotion are refined and our attention is shifted from the harsh realities of everyday life to purer and elevated transcendental world.

While reading a poem, a special kind of interaction happens between the reader and the poem which can be called a literary experience. Enjoyment and pleasure originates from literary

experience, complete absorption, emotional involvement and the specific type of interaction between the reader and the poem. Like a state of intoxication, it helps us to forget ourselves and indulge in eternity.

1.1 Linguistic potentialities

Poetry is a potential source for teaching vocabulary. The vocabulary used in poetry is many times larger than the vocabulary in speech. If a student's training is limited to conversation practice and ordinary language, then he will lose the opportunities to hear a majority of English words. Poetry aids the learners to expand their knowledge of vocabulary. The words in poetry are usually used in unfamiliar ways. They are multidimensional and open to interpretation.

The syntactic patterns and the linguistic structure of the poems are usually complex and different from that of ordinary language. The complexity of the structure contributes to mental exercises and development. In literature, we find some stylistic word order inversions like the followings:

"Like a blazing ball of fire, over the edge of the world,
beyond the horizon disappeared the Golden sun."

Me up at does
out of the floor
quietly stare
a poisoned mouse.

still who alive
is asking what
have i done that
You couldn't have.

E.E.Cummings

Poetry is highly suggestive and associative. It speaks subtly of different meanings to different people. It is rare that two readers react identically to any given text. It is multidimensional in meaning. Each reader will find different meanings out of poems. And, in the very best poetry, the same reader can return repeatedly to the same text and continue to find new meanings which had not surfaced before. "It can be a vehicle for thought and an instrument for shaping language" (Natalie Hess 2003:4)." It provides material open to interpretation" (Bradford 1968).

Poetry is the most memorable kind of language. The use of rhythm and rhyme by poets makes their words and sentences easier to recall. Moreover, people remember best what is interesting for them rather than what they are told to remember.

Poetry presents an economical way of using language. Poets try to express as many meanings as possible by as few words as possible. Poetry means saying a lot using minimum words. Making 'a lot out of a few' or making infinite interpretation

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based on finite words intensifies the creative power of language users. Chomsky (1968) believes that creativity is one of the main characteristic of human language which differentiates it from any other communicative skills.

1.2 Pedagogical potentialities

As mentioned earlier, poetry is a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Learning is dull and boring. The inclusion of poetry in the dull and boring processes of learning reduces the burden and facilitates the procedure. It has an unbelievable power in persuading, stimulating and encouraging the uninterested reluctant learners.

It brings a kind of participation that no other text can produce (Natalie Hess 2003:4). Openness to interpretation, multilayered meanings and ambiguity provides an ideal situation for group discussion and outpouring of the variety of ideas and opinions. Interpreting the multidimensional meanings of poetry induces the interaction between the learners. They share experiences and engage in real communicative activities. As mentioned by Gajdusek Lida (1988), we should exploit poetry in the classroom in order to encourage interactive, communicative classes for mature learners at a variety of levels of proficiency.

Poems aid teachers in integrating the four language skills.

The extensive and connotative vocabulary and complex syntax of poetry can provide variety of pedagogic activities for expanding language skills (Povey 1968).

The suggestive and associative qualities of language guarantee the validity of different interpretation of the learners and provide an infinite fund of interactive discussion. The very fact that no two readers will have a totally convergent interpretation sets up the tension necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas.

The rhythmical quality, the sound devices, and musical tone of poem makes it an ideal instrument for the practice of pronunciation, stress and intonation.

Poetry contributes to the personalization of the learning process. Since poetry deals with ideas, things, sensations and events which either form parts of the readers' experiences or which they can enter imaginatively, therefore, the readers are able to relate it to their own life.

2. Practical problems and difficulties

One of the main goals of EFL teachers is to promote students' knowledge of syntactic patterns and structure. Some people argue that poetry does little to contribute to this goal due to the structural complexity and its unique use of language. Many people think that poetry possesses a special 'poetic' language. In

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other words, there is an assumption that there are two separate registers of language; one for literature and another one for everyday matters. Poetic register is thought to be made up among other things of archaism (e.g. thou, ye, dieth, oft, etc.) or poetic equivalents of everyday words (e.g. sylvan/wooded bliss/happiness billows/waves etc.) and syntactic oddities chief among them are inversions of various kind (Alan Maley 1968:11).

Poetry introduces some universal topics such as; love, death, nature, etc. lacking a variety of topics related to everyday routines of the learners which makes it an inappropriate device in EFL classes.

The complex structure and unfamiliar words and culture used in poetry forces the learner to refer to reference books for their meanings and interpretation. The frequent reference to the dictionary for the meanings and interpretation frustrates and disappoints the uninterested learners.

Poetry will not contribute toward promoting students' academic and occupational goals. Since it is a highly imaginative kind of material it is not able to encourage goal directed activities which are directly relevant to the learners' practical needs.

3. Incompatibility between the two aspects: a dilemma

On one hand poetry gives pleasure. Many poems are fun, sweet and entertaining. They give encouragement. They involve the emotion and intellect of the learners totally. They are potential source for language practice. On the other hand, their structure is complex, extraordinary and distorted. The diction and vocabulary is multidimensional and ambiguous. The situation and the discourse are not ordinary.

The advantages of using poetry in EFL materials and classes along with the disadvantages of poetry leading to frustration and disappointment create an unbridgeable dichotomy. The two main goals of poetry for pleasure and enjoyment (its literary value) and using poetry as an aid in teaching language (its utility) seem to be contradictory and incompatible. Poetry can not be a useful device for the teaching of language, unless it provides a literary experience. In other words, using poetry in EFL classes which is not able to evoke literary experience is doomed to failure. One should use literature in EFL classes as an instrument for teaching language in a way which retains its literary value (Arthur 1968:201).

4. Practical suggestions

The remaining part of the article illustrates how a very systematic and structured approach to the study of poems can use the

compacted text of a poem to provide a variety of pedagogic tasks creating meaningful language lessons which integrate all four language skills. The suggested framework allows for the cohesion of the text with the life experiences of the students and heightens both the interest and involvement in the language lesson. An eight-step process has been offered. These are....

- Warm up activities
- Silent reading
- Listening, reacting and sharing
- Language practice (expansion)
- Communication
- Comparison and contrast
- Writing comments
- Turning the poem into prose

The poem chosen for this demonstration is a famous poem by “George Herbert”. This particular poem works well with intermediate EFL classes. The suggested framework works well for all kinds of poems. It has been tested with many poems and the results have been promising and remarkable.

The chosen poem is short and sweet. It is a poem that through intensity, pleasing sounds, alliteration, personification, simile and metaphor attracts the readers’ attention and gets them involved intellectually and emotionally. The subject matter is highly elevated and serious.

Virtue

GEORGE HERBERT

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright

The bridal of the earth and the sky: bride

The dew shall weep thy fall tonight;

For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue angry and brave color

Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye: watcher

Thy root is ever in its grave;

And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,

A box where sweets compacted lie;

My music shows ye have your closes,

And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,

Like seasoned timber, never gives; wood

But though the whole world turn to coal, ash

Then chiefly lives.

4.1. Step one—Warm up

The function of the warm up activities is to activate the background knowledge of the learners. Creating a relationship between the ideas presented by the poet and the learner's world knowledge aids the learners to build schemata. Rumelhart (1980) has called schemata the 'building block of cognition' – the 'pockets' or 'units of knowledge' that help us to understand the world. The teachers' job before reading the poem is to create the kind of mental model which facilitates the process of learning.

In this stage, an effort has been made to take something out of the poem that increases the personal involvement of the learners. For 'virtue' the following activities have been used:

A –Two pre-reading questions have been prepared concerning the central theme of the poem. What are short and transitory? What are eternal and everlasting?

B –The student are asked to write one sentence answer for each question.

C –we discuss some of those sentences in group.

D –we decide on the best answers and write a few of the best answers on the board.

4.2 Step two – Silent Reading

Since some poetic words and structures may prevent the total involvement of the learners, the meanings of some key words of the poem have been provided already. Providing the meaning of the words facilitates learning and reduces the cognitive burden of the students. Then the students are asked to read the poem silently and try to compare the poet's ideas and suggestions with their personal feelings and ideas. Silent individual reading supplies an opportunity for increased cognitive, emotional and intellectual involvement.

4.3 Step three –Listening, Sharing and Reacting

A tape recorder was used in my class playing the recited poem for the students while the students listened and followed along the text. This process can be repeated two or three times. The teacher can provide a dramatic reading of the poem by himself. The dramatic reading and playing of the recorded poem and the change in the tone of voice provide clues for the meanings of the ambiguous lines and words of the poem. After the third reading the students discover the meaning of many words which they only half understood in the first reading. The following activities can be accompanied to this step.

A –prior to reading, the meaning of some words can be explained or elicited from the students. Words like 'virtue', 'compacted', 'rash', etc.

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B –after the conclusion of this step, students write down any ideas which occurred to them while listening.

C –The students stand and talk together. They talk about their impressions and ideas.

4.4 Step four –Language Practice*

Some other words are selected from the text which may be problematic for the students but are essential for the understanding of the poem. For ‘virtue’ the selected words are:

sweet	gazer	ye	season
weep	rash	bid	chiefly
thou	grave	virtuous	whole
hue	timber	compacted	coal

Various activities can be planned for this stage. The students are asked:

A –to write definitions for the words and match with their friends’ definitions.

B –to locate the adjectives and say which one contributes most meaning to the poem.

C –In an activity called ‘how does the poem say it?’ they are given a line in everyday language and asked to find their equivalent in the poem. For example, ‘the beauty of the rose attracts watchers.’ Could become ‘bids the rash gazer to wipe

*, I owe the third and the fourth steps to Natalie Hess.

his eye' or 'spring is full of beauties' could become 'a box where sweets compacted lie'.

D –to discuss the meaning of ambiguous lines from the poem. For 'virtue', I discussed the followings with my students: 'a box where sweets compacted lie', 'bids the rash gazer to wipe his eye' and 'then chiefly lives'.

E –Teachers can give the students the opening of lines, and ask them to complete from memory.

4.5 Step five –Communication

In this step, we will discuss students' comments on the poem. The poem is used as a springboard for communicative activities. We exchange ideas and try to come to a general agreement about the theme of the poem.

Poems are different. Some of them communicate feelings and emotions. Some others try to instruct. Still others are didactic and try to teach morality. Based on the content of the poem, communicative transaction, group discussion and tasks can be designed. For 'virtue' it was mainly concentrated on the thematic content of the poem.

4.6 Comparison and Contrast

Comparing and contrasting with a similar poem is another useful activity which can foster communication and interaction. The students can talk about similarities and differences. They can

identify the facts that are present in one and not in the other. The grammatical, lexical and semantic complexity of the two texts can be compared. The following poem by 'Robert Frost' has been selected for this purpose.

Nature by Robert Frost

Nature's first green is gold.

Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf's a flower.

But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief.

So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.

The following activities can be designed for this step. The learners can be asked to answer the following based on their comparisons orally or in writing.

A –find out the similarities and differences between the two poems.

B –which one do you prefer? Why?

C –which one is structurally easier?

4.7 Writing comments on the poem

My students were asked to write down a paragraph on their first impressions and their opinions about the poem after reading and discussing the poem. If the teachers are not able to manage the

whole process within the limitation of class time, they can ask the students to do it outside the class as an extensive activity.

Those willing and enthusiastic students can read their comments for the following session.

4.8 Turning poetry into prose

Lastly, my students were asked to change 'virtue' into prose. This is one of the most useful activities in the development of writing and cognitive intellectual skills. It is beneficial in understanding and organizing the ideas. They learn how to think logically, read carefully and approach a poem critically. This activity is the opposite of the warm-up activities. In warm-up something from the outside world is taken to be incorporated in the poem. Here, we take something from the poem and expand it to the outside world.

5. The last word

In this paper I have tried to suggest a framework which will be a beneficial formula for the incorporation of poems in EFL classrooms as appealing teaching devices. Incorporating poems in EFL materials has many advantages. Poetry motivates the students to involve communicatively. It encourages interactive, communicative classes. It enables them to discover for themselves what is significant there. It motivates them to listen, talk, read and write. It is one of the most fascinating means of the

integration of language skills. It is a potential source of pleasure.

Adding poetry to the EFL materials decreases the boredom and frustration which is associated with formal education. In sum, as I have suggested in the title, it has a miraculous power.

Nevertheless, lack of interest among the learners and the teachers, ineffective teaching methodology, and inappropriate text may spoil the image of the poetry for the learners and lead to failure and frustration. For the poetry to fulfill its miraculous power, appropriate text should be chosen for the appropriate students. The choice of appropriate text accompanied with an effective teaching method and an enthusiastic Presentation by the teacher can turn the complex syntax and ambiguous meanings of the given poem into a challenging, fascinating, and stimulating device in EFL classes.

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