

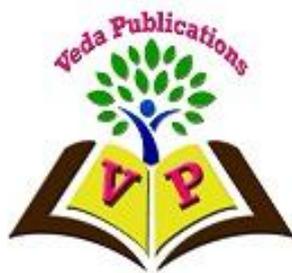


POETRY AS A DYNAMIC RESOURCE IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT



The recent historical positions regarding the use of literature in English language teaching and the inclusion of literary texts foster the development of language skills and critical thinking. The language of literature is well organised and is characterised by a wonderful choice of diction. The use of literature in a language classroom offers sufficient space for the learners to express their opinions, justify their arguments and mirror themselves. It helps them develop their critical thinking abilities and, at the same time, creates an atmosphere in which learners of different levels and backgrounds can participate. In this way, it provides an opportunity to the learners to use language in different contexts. Moreover, it makes the class lively, interactive and motivating. Different genres of literature use different types and domains of language. The present paper discusses some of the issues and ways in which poetry can be used in an ELT classroom. It also presents pedagogic practices and shares one activity which can be used by a teacher in an English class to develop language skills in the learners.

Keywords: *Poetry, ELT Classroom, Language Skills.*



INTRODUCTION

Language and literature are considered to be two aspects of the same coin which cannot be separated. No literature can exist without language and *vice versa*. The use of literature in a language classroom leads to the use of valuable authentic materials, language enrichment, cultural enhancement and personal involvement. In this way, learners are also exposed to actual language samples in real life. It offers ample opportunities for the learners to express their feelings and emotions and also enables them to contextualize the use of language for specific purposes. Learners get exposure to different genres of literature: poetry, fiction, essays, short-stories, and drama and hence get a wide range of individual, lexical, or syntactical items. In this way, learners can be made familiar with various aspects of language in contextualized body of texts which would also help them learn about the syntax, grammatical features and discourse functions.

THE PLACE OF LITERATURE IN ELT

From the 1950s to the early 1980s, there was little scope for literature in the ELT classroom. English language teaching was dominated by discourses that advocated pragmatic approaches to language, which focused on the use of language in social situations. Communicative competence and specific and functional purposes were the main concerns during this period. The English curriculum was designed along 'functional/notional lines' (Brumfit, 1985 p. 6). However, the 1980s saw a notable revival of interest of the inclusion of literature in ELT courses. Teachers started using literature in their classrooms to develop language skills in the learners. Many researchers claim that literature created a fresh atmosphere and a literary text was regarded as one of the most valuable resources available in EFL classrooms (cited in Thom 2008:p.120). The beginning of the 21st century experienced the winds of change and literature started to be considered as a dynamic source for language skills development (Hall, 2005). Perhaps the teachers realized that there was something wrong in neglecting such a potential source of language inputs. Therefore, literature still has a strong place in the ELT classroom.

POETRY IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

There has been a long-standing debate on whether poetry should be used in the ELT classroom to develop language skills. Several arguments have been made on 'why literature is seen distant to EFL/ESL contexts'. The most critical objection raised against poetry seems to have to do with its highly complex and metaphorical language. Linguists such as Topping (1968) pleads for the exclusion of literature from the ELT curriculum. He argues that "literature should be excluded from the ELT curriculum because of its structural complexity, lack of conformity to standard grammatical rules and remote cultural perspectives." Cook (1986) makes a similar point stating that the study of poetry "has little relevance to the learners' aim of understanding and producing more functional forms of the language." The other typical argument made against the use of poetry in the ELT classroom is that poetry cannot enable our students "to communicate in contemporary colloquial English" (Tomlinson, 1986). These arguments indicate that more classroom research studies and experimental results are necessary to justify the use of poetry to teach language. However, there are some well-known language experts and scholars who advocate the use of poetry as a great teaching tool in the ELT classroom (Tomlinson, 1986; Collie and Slater, 1987; Maley and Duff, 1989; Maley and Widdowson, Finch, 2003). Some of them have highlighted the positive results of using poetry in ELT classrooms and others recommended the use of poetry therein, because poetry constitutes "valuable authentic material" and promotes "cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement" (Collie and Slater, 1987).

REASONS FOR USING POETRY

1. Valuable Authentic Material: One of the main reasons for using poetry in the ELT classroom is that it says something "fundamental about human issues, and which is enduring rather than ephemeral" (Collie and Slater, 1987). Most works of poetry are not created for the primary purpose of teaching a language. Course materials developed recently include many samples of language in real life contexts (i.e., travel timetables, city plans, pamphlets, cartoons etc.). Poetry can be a beneficial



complement to such materials and motivate the learners towards learning the target language by making it more interesting, relevant and enjoyable.

2. Cultural enrichment: Culture plays a major role in learning a target language as it has a great impact on the learners' language use. Poetry, being a deep and meaningful literary genre, can broaden learners' cultural awareness. It can add to their understanding of the social, historical, political and religious domains of the target society. Teaching poetry enables students "to understand and appreciate cultures different from their own in time and space, and to come to perceive traditions of thought, feeling and artistic form within the heritage the literature of such cultures endows" (Carter and Long, 1991). While working on the tasks and activities designed on the poetic texts, learners can learn from different cultures and expand their knowledge about the ideas, customs, and social behavior of a particular society.

3. Language enrichment: Hughes (2007) claims that poetry stimulates language acquisition. Expressing a similar view, Kelleem (2009) points out that "Poetry is a source of content-rich reading material; a model of creative language in use; a way to teach vocabulary in context; and a way to draw learners' attention on English pronunciation, rhythm, and stress." He adds that a poem more than any other type of literary text can provide an opportunity to learners to use and develop their language skills. However, as Hughes (2007) points out, this particular literary genre "is often marginalized" in the ELT classroom.

4. Personal involvement: As Collie & Slater (1987) point out, "poetry can help learners in the process of learning a language because of the personal involvement it fosters in them." Since it deals with universal themes, it relates to learners from different social and cultural backgrounds. It stimulates learners' imagination and emotions and leads them to become more personally, imaginatively and emotionally involved. It motivates them to explore their own personal feelings and emotional responses, which they can relate to their own life due to their past memories and associations.

There are some other reasons for using poetry in the ELT classroom, i.e. its short length, suitability for a single classroom lesson, and peculiar linguistic

features like polysemy of words, alliteration, etc. Additionally, its evocative character, imagery and appeal to feelings make the language class very challenging, interesting and enjoyable.

LANGUAGE IN POETRY

Different genres of literature use different types and domains of language. The language employed in poetry, however, makes it very different from others genre of literature. This is what Widdowson calls "deviant use" of language. In other words, poetry uses language in unusual contexts. Language is not used in the conventional sense. For example, the lines

"Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
In the forest of the night"

at the surface level indicate that a tiger has been torched in a dark forest. It does not stimulate any deep emotion or feeling in the reader. After getting into their non-literal interpretation, however, by evoking metaphors, symbolism, similes, analogies, etc., the reader understands the unconventional use of language which is presented in revealing the fury of God or Energy in the cosmos. Taking all these into account, a teacher is suggested to teach the following aspects while using poetry in a language classroom.

- a. Reading aloud
- b. Guessing from the title of the poem
- c. Selecting key words and phrases
- d. Listing words with synonyms and antonyms
- e. Thematic discussion
- f. Relating poem with personal experiences
- g. Discussing questions
- h. Rewriting the poem

ACTIVITY

Read the following poem, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by W.B. Yeats and answer the questions which follow:

The Lake Isle of Innisfree

I **will arise and go now**, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and
wattles made;
Nine bean rows **will I have** there, a hive for
the honey bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
And **I shall have** some peace there, for
peace comes dropping slow,



Dropping from the veils of the morning to
where the cricket sings;

There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a
purple glow,

And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I **will arise and go now**, for always night and
day

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by
the shore;

While I stand on the roadway, or on the
pavements grey,

I hear it in the deep heart's core.

– W. B. Yeats

TEACHING TO TALK ABOUT FUTURE PLANS

In most work situations, we need to plan for future actions. Project proposals, the recommendation section of reports etc., will require predictions about the future. Business plans or chairmen's addresses to shareholders have a great deal of talk about future prospects. Learners also need to indicate future in the letters that they write for various academic and official purposes. Sometimes at interviews, they are asked about their plans. This poem can be used as a sample text to teach them how to talk about what they propose to do in the future.

GUESSING THE THEME

The learners may be first asked to guess the central idea of a poem by just focusing on its title. They can also do this in pairs and then discuss their reflections with the whole class. This would help the teacher know how much critical ability the learners of the class possess and how the same can be used to help them in their further learning. It would further help the teacher in dealing with the poem. By studying poems, learners can gain the ability to appreciate a writer's composition and develop sensitivity for the words and phrases used in the poems. Subsequently, it will improve their analytical ability.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The learners can be asked the following questions: What is the poem about? Why does the poet feel the urge to move away? Do you think the poet will really go away or is it an expression of a dream? Do you sometimes feel the same way as the

poet does? Why? Name the creatures mentioned in the poem.

The teacher can organise the class in pairs or groups and motivate them to participate in the discussion.

The teacher can provide the learners more sentence structures or phrases which are used to talk about future plans.

VOCABULARY

The teacher can highlight the words and phrases in the poem and ask the learners to guess their meanings. For example, which senses do the following phrases appeal to? *Veils of the morning, evening full of the linnet's wings, deep heart's core, of clay and wattles made, water lapping, midnight's all-a glimmer and noon a purple glow* etc. The learners can also be asked to use the words in their own sentences. They can also be asked to read the poem aloud stressing the parts in bold and mark the rhyming words.

PRONUNCIATION SKILL

In verse, the pronunciation of words becomes crucial because of the poetic emphasis on syllable count, rhyme, alliteration etc. If we mispronounce words, they can vary in number of syllables and subsequently upset the rhythm of a metrical line. A poem should be read loudly by following the rules of accentual patterns, meter, foot and other technical devices which would help the learner grasp the pronunciation of words in context. Later the learners should also be asked to read the poem loudly. This practice would help them overcome mother tongue interference.

METHODS TO USE POETRY IN ELT CLASSROOM

There are certain methods that help a teacher choose the poems to use in the language classrooms. Some of them are:

- Choose the text form the culture the learners can relate to
- Make the classroom activities learner-centered
- Ensure the participation of each learner in the activities
- Encourage and motivate learners through positive feedback
- Ask the learners not to just paraphrase the poem



- f. Encourage the learners to arrive at possible and new meanings
- g. Explain less, but whenever required, explain with reference to the context
- h. Focus on the manner in which language is used in poems

CONCLUSION

Poetry is considered a dynamic resource in the ELT classroom. However, some challenges are encountered by language teachers while teaching language through literature. First, there is the lack of pedagogically-designed appropriate materials that can be used by language teachers in their classrooms. Second, there is also a lack of training in the area of teaching language through literature. Many teachers try to use literature in their classrooms but lack the training in that area. Third, the objectives have not been defined clearly as far as the role of literature in ELT is concerned. In such situations, a teacher plays a major role. S/he can identify the language needs of the learners and then determine the objectives of language teaching based on their needs. Then s/he can select an appropriate literary text or genre and use that in the language classroom to cater to the language needs of the learners. While selecting a literary text to be used in a language classroom, a teacher should take into account the students' existing level of proficiency in English, their interests, their educational and social background, culture, age, gender etc. If handled carefully, the use of literature in the ELT classroom can be an effective tool for developing the language skills in the learners. It can also be a window for the learners to look into the culture of the target language and building up a cultural competence in them.

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SHORT BIO

Dr. Deepak Kumar is currently serving as an Adhoc Faculty in the department of Science and Humanities, National Institute of Technology Andhra Pradesh. He has earned his PhD degree in ELT, M.Phil (ELT), B.Ed and PGCTE from the English and Foreign Languages University Hyderabad. His areas of specializations include English language teaching, innovative teaching methods, designing self-instructional materials and CPD.