

Introducing Poetry in the Language Classroom to Help Develop Learner's Speaking

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing the pros and cons of using poetical works or poetry in the language classroom. There is an attempt made to justify the use of poetry in language teaching by throwing some light on the existing debate surrounding the issue. It will also try to demonstrate how poetry may be effectively used in the class to help develop a learner's speaking ability through discussion activities.

1. Introduction

The foremost reason for introducing and using literature in the language classroom is to encourage and expand students' creativity and the faculty of imagination. However, deciding on an appropriate text for a class is a crucial issue mainly because, when choosing a text, language difficulty has to be considered, so that access is not restricted and learners can attain a basic level of comprehension. McKay (1986), however, cautions against simplification of texts, since this may result in diluting information and reducing cohesion and readability. Students also need to be able to identify *with* the experience, the thoughts and situations depicted in the text, in order 'to make connection to personal or social significance outside the text' (Brumfit, 1985: 108). Therefore, as McRae (1991:126) suggests, a good choice would be any text that encourages or invites interaction with the world of ideas, a text that 'affirms, confirms and expands the indispensable human capacity to read the world'.

The term 'literature' now encompasses a wide range of genres from popular fiction, to advertising and film in order to make the whole teaching/learning process more attractive and interesting. However, for the sake of the present paper, the focus will be on the use of one particular genre, poetry, and its relevance and application in the language classroom, especially in developing learner's speaking skills.

'Poetry', is often used in the restricted sense of the classical canon of literature; however, in this study, this is not the case. This article aims at discussing how poems can be used to arouse learner's interest and curiosity and make the foreign language learning process a pleasing and rewarding experience. Poetry is chosen because of its poetic qualities, which, if explored properly could be a source of immense satisfaction. Here poetry is not used as a means of testing memorising ability, as in many cases where learners in a traditional learning environment are asked to memorise a poem, without even understanding what the poem stands for. The emphasis throughout is on using poetry to foster the meaning of language used, i.e. on helping students to become 'language-users', rather than on providing them with knowledge about language (van Lier, 1995:9). In this 'whole-language' approach learners are exposed to meaningful 'chunks' of language. This means firstly that the chunk of language are much larger than those traditionally presented in the EFL classroom and secondly that these larger chunks of language are integrated within a clear social context which they can relate to and imply in their own day-to-day lives.

Poetry recognises syntax, invents its own vocabulary, freely mixes registers and creates its own punctuation. The genre draws creatively on a full range of archaisms and dialects, and generates vivid new metaphors along with patterning sounds and ordering rhythms. However, it is interesting to note that, these effects and linguistic devices are also found in advertisements, nursery rhymes, jokes, riddles, political slogans, hymns and songs. However, it is probably true to say that poetry employs a higher concentration of such linguistic devices or effects than other forms of discourse. For this reason, as pointed out by Leech (1988) and Widdowson (1984) poetry has been described as deviating from the norms of language. Poetry often has the quality of a story; usually many poems narrate a story, having a beginning, middle and an ending, initiating further interpretation, understanding and thought.

2. Usefulness of poetry as a text in the classroom enhancing learner's language ability, especially speaking

As observed by Bygate (1987: vii), 'Speaking is in many ways an undervalued skill... which deserves attention.' In Bangladesh, in the English language usage ability scenario, students are able to read works in the original English version, but are still hesitant to ask for a glass of water in the language. Although students are quite good in reading and writing, they are unfortunately weak in their speaking ability, even after twelve years of compulsory English learning. Most language teachers agree that to get students talking is difficult although most satisfying.

Moreover, as pointed out by Wilkins (cited in Bygate,1987:6), when classroom activity is determined by the teacher, 'we are protecting [the learner] from the additional burden of having to make his own choices', resulting in the learner not being 'able to transfer his knowledge from a language-learning situation to a language-using situation'. The difference between '*knowledge*' about a language and '*skill*' in using it, as noted by Bygate (1987:3), is crucial in the teaching of speaking.

Now the argument that poetry frequently breaks the 'rules' of language, can open up other possibilities as by so doing, it communicates with the reader in a fresh and original way. Moreover, it is important to note that language may not be quite as rigidly governed by rules as usually thought. This is even truer in the case of 'speaking'. Listening to any conversation for a considerable period of time will reveal this fact. Two native speakers of English having a relaxed casual conversation may disclose examples of slips of the tongue which are actually 'incorrect' uses of grammar and vocabulary.

Conversely, most teachers would agree that it is pedagogically useful and necessary to provide students with idealised language rules. However, when using poetry in the classroom, the teacher could in fact exploit the more 'deviant' or unusual use of language found in it as a basis for expanding the student's language awareness and interpretative abilities. For example, if a poem contains unusual grammar then students could be asked to pinpoint in what way it is unusual and to contrast this with more commonly accepted uses. In so doing, they would attain some kind of conclusion about the stylistic effect conveyed by the language, and hence the meaning of the poem. All of these would initiate discussion and interpretation and multifarious application of language. A poem that mixes formal and informal registers

could be used as a starting point for a lesson sensitising students to different uses of register.

In selecting a poem for the class, teachers need to ensure that they choose poems suitably graded to the level of the students and that they are given as much help as possible in understanding the language of the poem. It should also be noted that some students may actually understand the literal meaning of each element in the poem without being able to engage in an interpretation of its deeper meaning. In such cases, teachers may devise activities which will smoothly lead students towards making interpretations of their own, rather than demanding that they generate their own interpretations from the start. All these will enable the teacher to decide how poetry can be of value to the language learner.

2.1 Poems as texts - linguistic and universal value

It is important that texts should provide good resources for a variety of classroom activities in order to give students more chance to gain true familiarity with any work as a whole. Most importantly, the texts should have the capacity to engage the interest of the student. For example, as noted by Collie and Slater (1987), while short stories offer greater variety than longer texts, offering greater chance of finding something to appeal to each individual's tastes and interests, poems offer an ever richer and varied range and are a source of much enjoyment.

However, a poem may not always be a favoured item in the classroom mainly because of its deviant and densely metaphorical use of language. The element of the out-of-the-ordinary and unexpected nature of poetry makes it both more attention-grabbing and awe-inspiring, initiating curiosity and motivation in the reader. However, teaching poetry becomes especially difficult when the emphasis is put on the issue of grammatical correctness. In the traditional EFL scenario, there was little place for literature, poetry in particular, with its deviations in language usage and in uses of unusual imagery, since 'it [poetry] is misleading as a model [in teaching approach]...that insists on the gradual accumulation of correct forms' (Widdowson, 1984:162).

However, the use of poetry in teaching language is increasingly being seen as a road to learning by ESL practitioners from both philosophical and practical perspectives (Bakhtin 1986; Carter and Long 1990; Widdowson, 1975). As pointed out by Hess (2003:20):

...poetry, seems to bring out emotions and entering a literary text, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation almost no other text can produce. When we read, understand and interpret a poem we learn language through the expansion of our experience with a larger human reality.

Collie and Slater (1989) promote literature as authentic material that deals with universal human concerns, and invites personal involvement. They add that the brilliant concision and strong imagery of poetry enable the learner to experience the power of language outside the straightjacket of more standard written structure and lexis. Poems often explore themes of universal concern and embody life experiences, and thus initiate a strong response from the reader. There is also the initial advantage of length as many poems are appropriate to a single classroom lesson. Provided that learners are given help with the necessary personal and linguistic resources, they are expected to attain the fuller enjoyment of a poem that comes from a sense of sharing the poet's created world and becoming, as readers, a new creator of meaning.

Widdowson (1989) also argues that poetry has characteristics which make it especially well qualified to assist learners in developing their ability to use language, and to put linguistic forms to the service of meaning. He adds that in the interpretation of poetry, there is a necessary interdependence between the understanding of formal structure and the recognition of a communicative effect. Meaning is a function of a focus on form and an increased awareness of the subtleties of poetic representation and inevitably entails an increased awareness of the signifying potential of grammar. Although, poetry and grammar, linguistic analysis and literary interpretation, have by tradition been seen as distinct polarities and in opposition, according to Widdowson (1989) they can be combined for mutual benefit, and can initiate practical pedagogy from a broader educational perspective.

According to Hess (2003), through its drama, intensity, and tightly controlled emotional context, a good poem is suitable for close reading, with much language unfolding as the reader goes along with newer understanding and interpretations of the same verse and, as a result, much good language practice. In dealing with a poem in the classroom, she suggests a nine-step technique that includes, 'trigger', 'vocabulary preview', 'bridge, listen, react, and share', 'language', 'picture', 'more language', 'meaning and spin-off'. She also provides a description of each step and demonstrates how they should work to initiate the best output. Hess claims that she had applied the formula to any number of

poems, and always found it enjoyable, linguistically rich, and communicatively satisfying.

Moreover, Maley and Duff (1989) point out that although, for many years now, literature, in particular poetry, has not been regarded as 'proper' material for foreign language learning, the rhythm and cadence of poetic language that we had tasted during childhood, continues to flow as a deep undercurrent through our lives. In contrast to these writers, however, the whole thrust of the structuralist approach tended to exclude literature, and the utilitarian favouritism towards the communicative approach deflected attention away from anything which did not seem to have a practical purpose. When literature was included in traditional language programmes, the emphasis was on the use of texts for commentary and analysis or merely for illustration. In the case of poetry, for teachers, it was simply an extra option rather than an integral part of the language programme. In contrast, Maley and Duff (1989:7) suggest:

Poetry offers a rich resource for input to language learning. As such it is at least as relevant as the more commonly accepted types of input (e.g. contrived dialogues, isolated texts for reading comprehension, simulations, etc.). So, it should be given at least equal weight.

They claim that the use of a poem as the centrepiece of a unit of material does not prevent the use of other types of language in relation to it. For example, they demonstrate that the language used to agree and disagree about 'meaning' in a poem will not be essentially different from the language of discussion central to any interactional activity. Therefore, if poetry is integrated with other forms of language, and thus demystified through a direct approach, students will come to an understanding of what is special about poetry as a mode of language use.

Maley and Duff also consider the many advantages which poetry seems to offer. As a form of language use, it is universal. Most themes (e.g. love, death, nature, religious belief, despair, etc.) of poetry are common to all cultures, and the conventions (for example, rhythm, rhyme, metre, alliteration, repetition, etc.) governing the language of poetry are likewise familiar, and readily recognisable to foreign language learners from their mother tongue experience.

Therefore, the only unfamiliarity would be the foreign language which they may not know, although they may know the conventions of poetry which both their mother tongue and the foreign language in question may have in common. Therefore, although at first sight, poetry in the foreign language may appear impenetrable, nevertheless, familiarity with the conventions of poetry in

the students' mother tongue would make it more readily accessible to him or her. Moreover, the realisation that though they may be relatively inexperienced in the language they can still appreciate (to a degree) the use of language in it, would work as an added advantage. The opportunity to play with language also helps the learner learning it. Moreover, poetry is the medium par excellence as all poets stretch the language by coining new words, creating new collocations, experimenting with sound, using old words in new ways, and so on. The ambiguity of a poem evokes individual interpretations, leading to the opportunity for discussion.

Moreover, poetry deals with important experiences and heightens the readers' perception not only of such experiences, but also of seemingly trivial or unimportant ones. Poetry, thus, provides a content which will appeal to learners because they are able to respond to it in their own way, adding to the motivating factor in learning. The possibility of having multifarious interpretations will also let each individual student feel that he or she has a valid contribution to make while discussing a poem. The suggestive, colourful and associative quality of poems suggest that each learner's personal interpretation has validity. Since each person's perception is different, poems initiate an almost infinite fund of interactive discussion and can create the atmosphere necessary for a genuine exchange of ideas. The development of a personalised reaction to texts engaging the intellect as well as the feelings is a very important part of the language learning process.

Moreover, the memorability feature of a poem offers students with the opportunity to unconsciously absorb language that can enable them to retrieve grammatical and lexical information they did not know they had. In language teaching, stress and rhythm are often taught through the imitation of model sentences. According to Brown (cited in Maley and Duff, 1989:11), rhythm 'is not something extra...it is the guide to the structure of information in the spoken message', and therefore, even though poetry may not focus expressly on rhythm, it can help develop a sensitivity towards it. Moreover, some of the essential features of fluent speech, such as clarity of diction, phrasing, stress and rhythm, control and variation of pace and so on, flow naturally from reading poetry out aloud. Poems also offer a complete context in compact form. The meanings conveyed in poems are usually expressed very economically. In order to retrieve these meanings and talk about them, it is necessary to expand and extend the words on the page; consequently, from a small language input a large and varied output can be generated.

However, there may still remain some doubts about the value and practicability of using poetry as a major element in language teaching because of the conception that 'poetry' is equivalent to a special register which is characterised by archaisms, peculiar inversions, heightened vocabulary, and so on. Nevertheless, in the classroom, there is no need to choose poetry with these features. A teacher should rather choose the ones which are closer to normal, everyday language. Moreover, modern poetry does not necessarily use special language features. Choosing this kind of poetry minimises the problem of language that is 'too special'. When teachers come to select poems they will need to take into account which poems are suited to the learners' interests, language and maturity levels. Therefore, as far as possible, the level of difficulty of the poem should approximate the level of competence of the learners. Learners should be offered access to poems through carefully chosen activities and tasks that are designed to help them appreciate the lyrical and melodic qualities of poetry as well as its metaphorical richness in order to facilitate comprehension.

McRae and Vethamani (1999) observe that the growth of strong local literatures in English has triggered a corresponding interest in incorporating such texts into language teaching materials. However, Vethamani (1996) argues that new literatures are unjustly overlooked in many teaching contexts, whereas their inclusion in the classroom can broaden students' perception of the use of English in wider cultural contexts, which will continue to fuel interest in using literary texts for cross-cultural exploration. As such, literature lends itself well to investigating similarities and differences between self and others, and to an awareness and understanding of 'the other' (Kramsch 1993). For local learners, it can be suggested that incorporating poetry written in English by local poets will be appropriate and an added benefit to the learner who would be quite at ease to have something from their own surrounding and culture.

3. Poetry: Realm of 'intuited truth'

According to Kermode (1957: 128) poetry is 'concerned with intuited truth, not with what is discursively explicable by the reason'. This section of the article will try to expand the idea of 'intuitive truth' and will demonstrate how a poem can be effectively used in the language classroom.

The imaginative space which poetry allows the reader is exactly in the realm of 'intuited truth', and that is what gives the reader the widest range of intuitive possibilities. Many poems rich in language and imagery represent aspects of human experience in direct but intuitive and concise but rich terms. Although poetic

diction and the concept of the poet as a kind of seer contribute to the distancing of poetry from day-to-day reality, in the 'average' mind, nevertheless, there are texts that can be approached as a simple functional message. The poem titled 'This is Just to Say' by William Carlos Williams is a fine example of the use of such 'daily' language use. The poem can be presented in a message form and when it is done as presented below, it gives the reader a very simple everyday message, perhaps written on a piece of scrap paper, and left on the tea-table for someone to read.

'This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me, they were delicious, so sweet and so cold.'

A whole range of ideas will emerge if questions are set on the poem such as, where could the message be found, and what its function might be. The text, as presented above, is both a simple message and an open text: a note of apology, and a description of feelings of enjoyment. The text does not look like a poem.

If it is next presented as it was originally written, the pertinent question that arises is whether it suddenly changes from being 'not a poem' to being a poem.

This is Just to Say

I have eaten
The plums
That were in
The icebox
And which
You were probably
Saving
For breakfast
Forgive me
They were delicious
So sweet
And so cold

- William Carlos Williams

This original presentation will certainly promote further discussion on issues related to the poem. In order to keep the discussion going, learners have to make use of their 'experience' and 'knowledge of the world'. The issues related to natural intensity of longing and the after-effect of the event when the reality

takes the apologetic turn will be points of interests to learners. Experience can also initiate questions such as:

- Have you ever felt tempted before about eating/doing something? What did you do then?
- Do you think it is okay to behave this way?
- Was the person your friend whom you have done something similar before?
- What was his/her reaction to the incident before?
- What might be the reaction of the host after reading the note?
- Do you think you should replace the fruit next time you turn up? Why/why not?
- How would you have felt if someone had done the same to you?

Knowledge of the world may initiate questions such as:

- What is a 'plum'? Is there any fruit that grows in your country, which resembles a 'plum'?
- Why do you have to apologise if you could eat the fruit without permission, when the host is your friend or someone very close to you?
- What age group do you think the person belongs to? Was it is very mature thing to eat the plums without permission?

There are also poems written in the form of dramatic monologue. We quite often talk to ourselves while alone. We talk about tit-bits of life and also sometimes create imaginary situations and build up imaginary conversations on them. There are many poems written in the form of a dramatic monologue which constitute a very rich resource for developing spoken skills, by poets like John Donne, Robert Browning, Samuel Coleridge, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, and many others. These poems can be used to compare and contrast human nature and what goes on inside their mind at a given point of time or for a specific situation. Here is an example of a dramatic monologue by Robert Browning. The poem is titled 'Porphyria's Lover'.

Porphyria's Lover

The rain set early in tonight,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:
I listened with heart fit to break.
When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;
Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side
And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,
And spread, o'er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me - she
Too weak, for all her heart's endeavor,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,
And give herself to me forever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could tonight's gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:
So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew
While I debated what to do.
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound

Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before,
Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria's love: she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,
And yet God has not said a word!

- Robert Browning

The narrator of the poem has a study to read late in the evening. It gives us a vivid picture of the nature and climate of that particular night, when the story begins and unfolds gradually, leading us through quite a dramatic atmosphere and feeling of uneasiness and dismay. The story is told by one character who also informs us of the situation and the feelings of the other character. Through him we come to understand the situation of the lady.

Many questions will emerge from the reading of the poem. These will surround the characters, subject-matter, story line, the tone and message of the poem, and what its function might be. The text is both a gripping story and an analysis of the mind of an abnormal person. The poem will encourage discussion on issues related to love, psychological complexity of humans, the eagerness to possess forever, the obsession regarding eternity, disappointment and desperation in love, and the after effect of the event when reality takes a strange twist. The following questions can be initiated for discussion:

- What do you think the poem is dealing with?

- What sort of relationship is this? What is the tone of the poem?
- What do you understand about the psychology of the main character? Would you call him a 'lover' or a 'killer'? Explain your choice.
- How do you feel now that you have read the poem?
- What are the contradictory elements in the poem?
- What is your reaction to the central character?
- Have you come across any such characters in real life or in literature?
- How do you feel about the lady?
- Do you ever feel such complexities in your life dealing with relationships?
- Do you feel that everything is justified in love?
- Do you feel that the character is abnormal?
- How would you explain the last line of the poem- 'And yet, God has not said a word!'?
- What do you think that the man would do afterwards when reality will actually strike him?
- Do you come across similar stories in the news or newspapers? What preventives do you think could be taken to avoid such a situation?
- If you are to retell the story with a positive tone, how would you frame it?

Poems that relate universal personal experiences and focus on memory and the passing of time are good choice because any such theme can appeal to readers from all cultures and age groups as humans have the natural tendency to connect themselves to personal experiences that are universal and common to everyone. These themes, therefore, can be a good base for discussion. Thus, a theme-based approach to poetry can help students to relate the situation to their own experience and talk about it in order to develop their interpretative and conversational skills. They can also be asked to imagine situations made complicated by chance and then initiate solutions through negotiation.

4. Conclusion

This article has discussed the pros and cons of using poetical works or poetry in the language classroom with an attempt made to justify the use of poetry in language teaching by throwing some light on the existing debate surrounding the issue. It has also demonstrated how poetry may be effectively used in the class, especially in order to help develop a learner's speaking ability through discussion activities. In order to do so, it has looked at a number of tasks and activities for exploiting poems with students. However, in planning a lesson using a poem it is always useful to try to anticipate some of the difficulties students may face when reading or studying a poem. By doing so, the teacher can design materials which help the students through some of the difficulties identified.

In many EFL contexts there are constraints/restraints on the teacher's part in terms of availability of books, or the set curriculum they are to follow. If the texts are imposed and used year after year, it becomes more and more difficult to maintain one's originality and enthusiasm, both on the parts of teachers and students. Goodwyn and Findlay (1999) point out that teachers teach best when they are enthused about a text/topic they are teaching. Nevertheless, it has already been observed that the available texts and materials including poems suitable for the target group can be successfully used to achieve objectives if used properly and systematically. In selecting poems for learners, it is necessary to remember that the teacher him/herself should find the poems enjoyable, entertaining and amusing because these feelings are infectious in a classroom. Selecting the right poem will also help break monotony prevailing in the classroom that stems from following the set curriculum for years.

It can now be reiterated that placing the language of the poem at the centre of classroom activities can initiate enthusiasm and productivity among learners, if the students' own interests and experience can be drawn on fully at all stages of the lesson, with the acceptance that the interpretation of one single poem will vary substantially from reader to reader. Many of the techniques that are commonly used in the classroom can equally be used when teaching poetry. Nevertheless, as already pointed out, poetry does have some fairly distinctive features from other forms of discourse. It is useful to identify these features in order to help students grapple with certain problems they may encounter while reading poetry.

Finally, it can be said that poems can be introduced in the class because of their poetic qualities, their use of everyday language in creative ways and because they fulfil a social and communicative purpose artistically.

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