



A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF TEACHING ENGLISH POETRY AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL AMONG C.B.S.E STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of poetry demands comprehension, appreciation, imagination and creation from the part of the learners. These objectives can be achieved through the use of Models of teaching making learning of poems more lively and dynamic. The Constructivist Model of teaching is a way that stirs the imaginative and creative dimensions leading to construction of knowledge. The Synectics Model of teaching is an approach which seems to stimulate appreciation and creative thinking of the learners as it provides them the scope to participate in various metaphorical activities which is the key to poetry learning. In this context, considering the potential of these teaching and learning models, the researcher is curious about the following questions:

1. Is the Pedagogical approach of teaching poetry in CBSE secondary schools effective in developing Appreciation and Poetic creativity while teaching English poetry?

This study, rooted in the transactional theory of literary reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), was embarked on to investigate issues on student reluctance in reading poetry that could be useful to teachers of poetry. A class of 39 form four students were selected for this study and it was evident throughout the study that the perceptions of reluctant learners when confronting the learning of poetry, stemmed from students' inability to make meaning out of a poem. Initial investigations showed that the choice of texts, pedagogy and teacher personality were the main cause of their negative perceptions towards poetry. To give the students an opportunity to reassess their perceptions of poetry, a six-week student-centred teaching and learning programme using suitable texts and reader-response approaches was carried out. The results yielded encouraging reactions from the students. Students' active, enthusiastic participation in the programme confirmed that appropriate pedagogy, text selection and teacher personality played a significant role in their perceptions of poetry.

KEYWORDS

Reluctant learners – learners who dislike learning poetry, **Literary competence** – competence in use and usage of literary devices, **Reader-response** – readers' own interpretation and reaction towards texts, **Learner-centred** – focused on learner needs, interest and inclination

introduction

The teaching and learning of literature in English in the Malaysian English as a Second Language (ESL) context has evolved from being a core part of the school English language curriculum to a split in 1990 where the subject focused only on the language for communicational purposes excluding literature, while in upper secondary, the subject Literature in English was offered as an elective for those interested in taking it. In 1999, the Ministry of Education announced a significant change in English Language Teaching (ELT) policy (*KPN/JPNS 2000*). The Literature in English component was introduced in the year 2000 into the Form Four and Form One English Language syllabi with the aim of enhancing students' proficiency in the English language. The aim of the component highlights the intentions to enhance students' proficiency in English language through the study of prescribed texts (five short stories and six poems for Form Four students). It also seeks to contribute to personal development and character building, and broaden students' outlook through reading about other cultures and world views.

One of the objectives to be achieved at the end of the literature programme is for students to be able to give their personal responses to the texts and also to show an awareness of how language is used to achieve a particular purpose (*Sukatan Pelajaran Kesusasteraan Dalam Bahasa Inggeris*, 1990, pp. 8-9). Based on my professional experiences as a teacher, many students, however, are far from achieving these objectives in reading literary works for several reasons. One glaring thing which even some instructors are unaware of is the role of literary competence. Research carried out by Carter and Long (1991) has shown that the study of literature is quite useless if the learner does not possess the literary competency and a certain degree of sophistication and familiarity with the particular cultural conventions as this will make learning the language a "laborious task" (p.24). Language proficiency alone is not sufficient for students to read, understand and appreciate literary works. In fact it is the inability to appreciate literary texts that keeps students away. Their knowledge of language, "would enable them to understand phrases and sentences, but they would not know, quite literally, what to make of [the] strange concatenation of phrases" found in literary texts (Brumfit, 1990, p. 24). Thus, students would be unable to read it as literature because they lack the literary competence which enables others to proceed. They would not have internalised the 'grammar' of literature which would permit them to convert linguistic sequences into literary structures and meanings.

Although poetry appreciation is one of the components of the *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM)* Literature in English programme, I have observed that a majority of the upper secondary students dislike and often shy away from poetry. A poem is usually not a favoured item for most ESL students mainly because of its “deviant use” (Widdowson, 1985, p.162) of language. For students, poetry is usually rated as making the least contribution to language skills development and they probably consider it as insignificant to any advancement in their studies or their future careers. This is the problem that needs to be addressed, arrested and rectified.

objectives

The aims of this study were firstly, to find out students’ perceptions towards poetry, based on their early experiences with the genre. Furthermore this study also looked at various approaches in the teaching and learning of literature, poetry in particular, CBSE students based on prescribed as well as other selected poems. The focus of this study, therefore, was on suggesting an interesting and practical way of introducing poetry to reluctant learners at secondary school level by enhancing the reflective, analytical and expressive abilities of the students in the classroom.

significance of project

By focusing on the opportunities a teacher has for using poetry as a basis for language practice, especially for reluctant learners of poetry in secondary schools, it is hoped that this effort would help teachers to present poetry to students in a more meaningful and purposeful way. Carter and Long (1991), have put forward three tendencies in the utilization of literary texts in language classes, namely for personal growth, cultural awareness and language enrichment. As such the approach and techniques in the teaching of poetry suggested in this study, would not only focus on improving student performances in assessments but also on helping students to indulge in poetry for pleasure and personal growth.

Above all, the activities that would be explored in this study are aimed at encouraging teachers to select appealing literary works which students can identify with and by which they can linguistically and emotionally be stimulated (Vethamani, 1993), so that the chance of teaching-learning process being a responsive, enjoyable and fruitful one for all parties increases. This in itself would be a motivating factor for students who have usually found poetry a boring subject to study.

literature review

Literature has been an important component of second language courses for a very long time in many parts of the world. More recently, however, a growing number of scholars have begun to reconsider the role of literature from a different perspective: instead of being taught in addition to the language proper, literature could be used as a resource for language teaching with a plethora of authentic and interesting texts that could benefit the process of second language learning from several points of view.

Widdowson (1975), Collie and Slater (1987), McRae (1991), Duff and Maley (1991), Lazar (1993), Carter and Long (1991), among others, have all identified three main ideas in which the use of literary texts as a language teaching resource can be beneficial. In a nutshell, there are three areas in which learners of literature can benefit from their involvement with literary texts, namely; language development, personal growth and cultural enrichment. Besides this, studying literature also helps build and develop the intellectual faculties of the learners.

Using Poetry to Develop Critical Readers

The usefulness of poetry in teaching secondary school students is proposed by Fehl L. Shirley (1983). Shirley sees the study of poetry as one stage of the process of sharpening thinking skills that are important in responding to various types of advertising. Poetry, Shirley asserts, helps students recognize the function of connotation, denotation, symbolism, and imagery. Knowledge of these techniques, Shirley argues, is integrally related to critical thinking, and students can use this knowledge effectively in confronting the "language of commercial and political persuaders." (p.1).

Francis Kazemek's work on the usefulness of studying poetry balances an intense appreciation for poetry with an in-formative, practical outlook both on how to present poetry in the classroom and on how such study can benefit students. In one of his papers on poetry and adult literacy (1985), Kazemek argues convincingly that adult literacy training should begin with the reading of poetry and other more expressive text. This argument is founded on Kazemek's contention that 1) literacy is not a process that can develop over a short period of time, and 2) such an assumption sets adult students up for disappointment.

The ambiguity of much poetry invites students to explore language "in a non-threatening manner," Kazemek argues, because it invites unique explications rather than finding a right answer. After immersion in the "compressed and symbolic world inside lyric poems," students "have been better able to move out from poetry to other functions of reading and writing." (pp.334-335). Hence, Kazemek underscores the necessity of promoting group discussion, questioning and reflecting by students.

Poetry for Cognitive Development

Poems usually do not have direct statements but are conditioned by emotional attitudes and their intention is to evoke the impact of expression. Poetry achieves its effects by careful selection of words that are suggestive not only of sensory experiences but also of the emotional attitudes. It is creative open-ended use of the language that uses a range of styles, techniques and features of languages. Poems usually have statements using figurative comparisons and concepts which are fused with the readers' or listeners' experiences, association and sensitivity so that a new dimension of reality becomes visible. Alton Biron Philip (1993) aptly says "What one receives from a poem is an experience. Poems have a 'total meaning' which is a blend of the poet's sense (what the poem is apparently about), his feelings (the poet's attitude), his tone (attitudes towards readers) and his intention (aim or effect)" (p. 117).

Poetry also enhances and challenges students cognitively as Tompkins (1980), aptly says, "constructing meaning from a literary work [poetry in this case], is a collaborative cognitive task". When reading a poem the focus is on the stages of understanding and learning that students have to undertake as it involves many kinds of mental activity that is from first glance impressions through to reflective evaluation of the written text (Brown & Gifford, 1975).

The Teaching of Poetry

Poetry is usually the genre that provides the most problems for the English teacher because students often reach secondary school with little experience in relating to poetry and are often hostile to it. Like what Lewis (1955) says ". . . people are always suspicious and a little afraid of things that they do not understand and instead of admitting it they are apt to invent reasons which are complimentary to themselves – such it is with poetry." On the other hand there are also students who, "wonder whether the study of poetry however enjoyable is not a waste of time or at least, an annoying obstacle" (Kennedy, 1994, p. 65).

Lockward (1994) also observes that "poetry is the genre most English teachers seem least comfortable with." (p. 65). She further states that most teachers acknowledged a discomfort with teaching poetry; some admitted that they do not enjoy or actively read poetry. Most teachers, according to Lockward (1994), said that they "had never had an English teacher who taught poetry effectively and, therefore, they had no models to emulate" (p. 65).

Kennedy (1994) observes that "students' dislike for poetry often stems from bad experiences with poetry, incompetent teachers, the print and the very nature of its presentation in books – the alien diction, conventions, and queer associations to things that are worlds apart and of course the string of mind boggling questions that follow the poem" (p. 187). In other words, students dislike poetry because of their own bad experience with poetry, thus it is the aim of this study to explore various teaching approaches to enhance students' interest and liking to poetry. The next section will therefore, discuss views on letting poetry serve each reader and encouraging poetry reading as an inquiry.

Encouraging Poetry Reading as Inquiry

Duke (1984) also discusses the need for an inquiry approach to reading, enjoying, and understanding poetry and echoes Fillion's (1981) emphasis on encouraging problem-solving and reflection. Duke stresses the danger of teachers championing the beauty and fruitfulness of a poetic reading experience while relying on a teacher-centered question and answer period: "...if we do not also provide equal time for students to enjoy, contemplate, and relive the experience of reading a text, we may be sending a contradictory message about what the purpose of literature study is." (p.3)

Traditionally, poetry lessons have been a teacher-centred process. In taking centre-stage, teachers often ask "a long series of questions and it is the teachers who are working through the text and not the students" (Carter & Long, 1991, p. 24). The study of a poem then becomes a series of long lectures that explains the literal and inferred meanings of the text. The teacher explains and agonizes over the meanings and nuances in a single line that may not contribute to the overall understanding of the text. More importantly such teaching will not do anything to develop an interest in the student to read or enjoy poetry.

The teacher's task, therefore, is to overcome this hostility that students have towards poetry first and then start exploring poetry with the students. There is no way we can force poetry onto students. The teacher has to create situations or circumstances for student participation whereby the students are 'lured' into the world of poetry and in the end, enjoy every minute of it. Participation does not depend on having high intellect or a good memory or a faculty for absorbing information.

research methods

This is a qualitative case study exploring reluctant learners' perception of poetry.

This study therefore, uses primary data collected through teacher-researcher field notes, semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to the sampling students in a school in Jaipur , Rajasthan. The Likert scale was used to evaluate the data collected then classified and summarised.

A convenience sampling of 39 students from CBSE board was used. Participant observation was carried out throughout a six-week duration of the study, during a series of poetry-based lessons. Here observations were recorded as field notes for each session. This technique was useful in providing additional information about teaching of poetry to reluctant learners.

A journal was maintained throughout the study with recorded jottings, field notes and personal reflections on the happenings in the classroom and the interaction that took place in the discussions.

As for primary data, three semi-structured interviews were carried out. The first interview, was carried out prior to the research proper, to gain personal information about the informants. The second

interview was carried out after they respond to a questionnaire for further clarifications concerning some comments students gave pertaining to their perceptions on the teaching and learning of poetry. The final interview was carried out individually with several students at the end of the research to seek their perceptions regarding the teaching of poetry. These interviews were audio-taped and transcribed into a Likert scale for analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study rooted in the transactional theory of literary reading (Rosenblatt, 1978), was embarked on to investigate certain issues on student reluctance in reading poetry that could be useful to teachers of poetry. It was evident throughout the study that the perceptions of reluctant learners when confronting the learning of poetry, stem from a basic ‘literary inadequacy’ and their inability to make meaning out of a poem.

The students’ negative attitude to most of the set texts confirmed the view that “text which is extremely difficult on either a linguistic or cultural level will have few benefits” (Vincent & Carter, 1986, p. 214). Research has also showed that learners are most motivated, most open to language input, when their emotions, feelings, and attitudes are most engaged (Tomlinson, 1986, p. 34). From the views, it is evident that for meaningful learning of poetry, students must understand and interact with the texts as well as make connections to their own lives. Thus, it is vital that teachers know “that teaching young adults requires familiarity with the characteristics of this age group” (Bushman & Bushman, 1997, p. 2) and select texts which are “consistent with the young adults’ experience, themes that are of interest to young people . . . and the language that parallels the language of young people” (p. 2).

Students’ views on teaching and learning poetry were generally negative. The findings revealed that 86.7% responded negatively towards poetry lessons. The negative feelings were expressed by students with the use of words such as “sad”, “not interested”, “bored”, “feel terrible”, “a drag”, “hate” and “*tak seronok*” (Malay word meaning ‘no fun’).

These views aligned with my perceptions regarding the many teacher-fronted ESL literature classrooms where traditional methods of instruction dominate, leaving little room for students to make meaning out of their encounter with texts. It is my perception that many literature teachers believe that their role is to instruct and transmit knowledge about texts so that learners can comprehend them and thus answer public examinations.

Implications for Curriculum Designers

One of the issues raised in student as well as teacher interviews in this study, was the selection of texts. The findings of this study suggest that set texts may not favour the learning of poetry as such texts fail to cater to the diversity of student interests and language needs. Selection of appropriate texts is crucial as readability is likely to be hindered not only by

linguistic complexity but also cultural alienation (Subramaniam, 2002, p. 66). As such, curriculum designers should perhaps see to it that a wide range of selection is provided to the teachers to select from as well as allow teachers a free hand in selecting their own texts based on student maturity, language ability and interest. Only then would students be “lost in the story, experiencing intensely and personally the events, places and people” (Bushman & Bushman, 1997, p. 18). Thus, it is imperative that curriculum designers be sensitive to the needs and interest of adolescents in the Malaysian context so that ultimately literary texts can get these young people excited about reading.

CONCLUSION

In helping students develop an appreciation and understanding of poetry, there are two fundamental principles to keep in mind. First, poetry must be read aloud. Second, poetry should be enjoyed (Elliot, 1996). Therefore the selection of poetry texts should be done keeping these two principles in mind. Responses to poetry are personal and will vary from reader to reader. Sometimes one line, or even one word, of a poem is all that a reader relates to, but at other times the reader will want to memorize the poem in its entirety. Some poems will make the students laugh and some will make them cry, some poems will confuse them, and some will be crystal clear. Teachers should forget about the pressure for the "right" responses from students and allow spontaneity and freedom for them to express their emotional reaction and response to the poem. At the upper secondary level, students are mature and it is only natural for them to want to have their say and speak their minds on the things that they see and read. In sharing their insights, understandings and questions about poetry, Mei Mei, Grace, Yan Xin, Ah Man and Faisal proved that the state of reluctance in learning poetry is not permanent and can be changed to enjoyment and engagement through conducive student-centered teaching and learning environment.

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