



Teaching of English Poetry at Under-graduate Level with Special Reference to the Rural Colleges of Nalbari District

Manoj Kumar Kalita

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Nalbari Commerce College
Nalbari, Assam- 781334
Email: mkkalita_ncc@rediffmail.com

ABSTRACT:

In our country English is used as a second language and therefore, to teach the language, English poetry has been considered as one of the best medias and, it has therefore been taught and learnt compulsorily at all levels. While talking about teaching English poetry, we should be clear that the objective of teaching this form of literature is not merely to make the learners understand the content of the poem but most prominently to teach different language skills i.e., receptive (reading, listening) and productive (writing and speaking) as well as other sub-skills of the language.

In reality the teaching of poetry to rural under-graduate students is not satisfactory so far, the objectives are concerned. The teaching of a poem is limited to make the students understand the content of the poem by dictating the meanings of the difficult words and paraphrasing the lines one by one which is followed by dictating answers of certain possible questions for the examination. Hence, there is a wide gap between the objectives of teaching English poetry and what is happening in real situation. This undoubtedly harms the students. The teachers tend to make the students learn the language rather than acquire it.

In this paper a humble attempt is made to discuss those steps that a teacher can follow for teaching a poem in order to teach the content as well as to improve the language skills on the basis of my experience and personal interview with a group of students of under-graduate level from a few rural colleges.

Key words: English, Poetry, Poem, Teaching, Reading, Rural

Introduction:

Teaching poetry offers the teachers some of the most fundamental, immediate, active, even physical ways to engage students in learning. Understanding poetry is considered a triumph of reason over emotion. It plays a crucial role in the growth of learning a variety of oral interpretations and also helps the students in appreciation, response and interactions. It develops students' power of creativity i.e. self-expression. However, these days poetry has been removed from the center of the literary curriculum by fiction, drama, cultural studies, and even literary theory. Teachers lament that students find poetry difficult and nerve-racking. They feel that students think it a mystery into which they have never been initiated whereas some others take poems to be cryptic messages with bits of advice or belief. Moreover, many students have little or no interest in poetry. They confess that they don't know how to read it, i.e., the art of reading a poem. Such students can't be expected to understand or appreciate a poem.

Objectives of Teaching English Poetry in Indian Context:

In our country English is used as a second language and therefore, to teach the language, English poetry has been considered as one of the best medias and, it has therefore been taught and learnt compulsorily at all levels. While talking about teaching English poetry, we should be clear that the objective of teaching this form of literature is not merely to make the learners understand the content of the poem but most prominently to teach different language skills i.e., receptive (reading, listening) and productive (writing and speaking) as well as other sub-skills of the language. That is to say, poetry is taught both as literature and language so far, the objective of teaching English poetry is concerned.

Teaching of English Poetry at Undergraduate Level (With Special Reference to the Rural Colleges of Nalbari District):

In reality the teaching of poetry to rural under-graduate students, specifically in the rural colleges of Nalbari District, is not satisfactory so far, the objectives are concerned. If we see the teaching-learning situation of English poetry in the rural colleges of Nalbari District of Assam, it comes to our notice that the situation is extremely disheartening. The teaching of a poem is limited to make the students understand the content of the poem by dictating the meanings of the difficult words and paraphrasing the lines one by one which is followed by dictating answers of certain possible questions for the examination. Except one or two, all the other teachers are teaching English poetry neither as literature nor as language. They are trying to teach word meanings and to test students' capacity for memorizing. A teacher teaching a poem should be able to arouse the feelings of students, he should be able to make the students love the poem; but in reality, it is not so. The students rather remain absent in the English classes as they breed a fear for the language as time passes. A teacher should be able to point out the subject matter, the emotional experiences, images used in the poem etc. to the students. But in practical it is rare among the English teachers in the region. A student does not derive the same satisfaction which he derives from other forms of literature like drama.

Hence, there is a wide gap between the objectives of teaching English poetry and what is happening in real situation. This undoubtedly harms the students. The teachers tend to make the students learn the language rather than acquire it. They teach poetry neither as literature nor as language. The fact that students are neither able to appreciate another poem by the same author nor they are able to communicate in the target language after teaching a poem is enough to prove it. Furthermore, the teachers do not see any difference between teaching poetry and prose. Whatever I am trying to say in this paper about the teaching of English poetry at the rural colleges of my district that is purely based on my personal interview with a major group of students from Arts Stream of three different rural colleges of the district.

In this paper a humble attempt will be made to discuss those steps that a teacher can follow for teaching a poem in order to teach the content as well as to improve the language skills on the basis of my learning and experience.

Qualities of a Teacher of Poetry:

A teacher of English poetry must possess certain qualities in order to teach poetry effectively. However, it should be mentioned that qualities are not inborn; these can be developed with time with a sense of devotion to the profession. The following few qualities can be enlisted as the basic qualities of a teacher teaching English poetry-

- He should be a lover of poetry.
- He should be a sincere student of English literature, culture and civilization.
- He should try to know the background of the poem before starting to teach.
- He should be able to understand the poet's experiences and impressions that the poet had at the time of composing the poem.
- He should be able to appreciate the poet's mood and the subject matter of the poem.
- He should be able to create a good atmosphere for the poem in the classroom using his body language and various teaching aids.
- His teaching should always be learner-centered.

Steps in Teaching a Poem:

The poetic territory immediately presents problems because it comes with a specialized technical language. In teaching poetry, every teacher therefore, will need to call upon and combine a range of techniques and methods. At the same time, a teacher would use his own tact for every poem because no two poems are exactly the same. A teacher has to decide how they will teach the subjects of poetics, metrics, and prosody. The teacher has to ask herself about the intended audience of learners – beginners, advanced, majors, graduate students, dabblers, artists, scientists? To speak of a rule or method, there are no hard and fast rules for teaching any language skills, so for teaching poetry too. However, a few steps can be laid down for teaching English poetry both as literature and language.

STEP 1: Introduction

The first step would be an introduction to the poem. This introduction may be biographical, explanatory or synthetic.

Biographical introduction: In a biographical introduction, a brief account of the poet's life and works is given. This is important for a correct understanding of the poem as a poem is the reflection of the poet's personality.

Explanatory introduction: In explanatory introduction, the meanings and explanations of difficult word or phrases or a summary of the poem are stated. But giving meanings of words are not meaningful as in poem words are to be studied in the context only. In case the poem is a long one or it is historical poem, a summary would help the students in concentrating during the teaching of the poem by the teacher.

Synthetic introduction: In synthetic introduction, the main theme of the poem is discussed. This is done by means of putting some questions which brings out the ideas of the poem.

STEP 2: Loud reading by teacher

After the introduction, the teacher should read the poem loudly with proper pronunciation, expression, rhyme and rhythm. Poetry is an oral art form and therefore loud reading is to be done asking students to notice the use of repeated words, rhyme and rhythms in the poem. Reading aloud is a dramatically-effective method of teaching poetry. It does have two advantages. It slows down the pace at which the students encounter the words. And it pushes them, continually, from eye to ear. Many teachers see reading aloud as an important step in teaching poetry. The teacher should apply his gestures and expressions and body movement in order to bring out the important points. He should create an atmosphere for the poem in the classroom. The imageries, figures of speech, comparisons and contrasts should be very nicely read and explained by the teachers.

STEP 3: Silent reading by students

After the loud reading by teacher, the students should be allowed for silent reading in the class. This will help the students in clarifying their doubts.

STEP 4: (Loud Reading by students)

After the silent reading by the students, now the teacher should ask a few students to read the poem loudly. While one student read the poem loudly, the others would listen to him. In the mean time, the teacher would correct intonation, pronunciation etc.

STEP 5: Detail Study

After loud reading by a few students, it would be time for detail study of the poem. The teacher now would make groups of two students each. The teacher would ask the groups to discuss the poem in detail in groups. When the groups start discussion, the teacher would monitor the groups and solve confusions of each group. The interaction among the group members and with the teacher will be in the target language.

STEP 6: Question from teacher

Now the teacher would ask questions from the poem in sequence and the groups would try to answer the question after discussion. The questions may be of the following types-

- (1) Yes/No or True/False or Either/or questions.
- (2) Multiple choice questions.
- (3) Question that can be answered from one part of the poem.
- (4) Question that can be answered by gathering information from various parts of the poem.
- (5) Questions that can be answered after proper understanding of the entire poem.
- (6) Questions in which students' experience can be related with those of the poet.

STEP 7: Loud reading by teacher

After the question-answer session, the teacher would read the poem loudly once again.

STEP 8: Reading by students for enjoyment

After reading loudly by the teacher, the students would be allowed to read the poem again silently, but this time for enjoyment.

STEP 9: Writing the central idea by students in group

After silent reading for enjoyment, the teacher would ask each group to write the central idea of the poem in about 100 words. The group members would discuss with each other and each group would write one central idea. The teacher would monitor the groups and help the weak students.

STEP 10: Reading out the central ideas loudly

The last step would be to read the central idea loudly by one member of each group. The students would listen to the reading. The teacher would also listen to the readers and try to correct the mistakes.

WHAT TEACHERS CAN DO FOR ENCOURAGING LOVE FOR POETRY:

So far, my experience is concerned, many students prefer prose to poetry. They say that they do not like poetry. During my interview with the students of the selected rural colleges of Nalbari district, I came across this dislike for English poetry in their minds. Students explained that they do not understand the deeper meaning of a poem and even the symbols. They read poems only for the sake of examination. They do not enjoy reading a poem. They feel poetry is boring. So, the teachers have something to do in order to change the minds of those students who dislike poetry. For this a teacher might do the following things.

1. As the students get difficulty in understanding the meaning of a poem, it would be better if the teacher read the poem aloud for the second time. While reading a poem for the second time, students will start to listen for the important elements of the poem and they would try to search for the things they didn't discover before.
2. While teaching a poem, the teacher should try to introduce the target poem with poems that his students already read. If students are facilitated to relate the target poem with poems they have already known, the students will learn a poem with much more enthusiasm and interest.
3. In order to create interest for poetry, a teacher may transform his reading corner into a poetry display corner. The teacher then can keep some poetry books for students and use post-it-notes with arrows indicating the use of repeated words, alliteration, symbols etc. This will help student in reading a poem on their own.
4. The teacher may start off each day, whatever he is going to teach, with a read aloud poem. If the teacher feels not good enough in loud reading, he may use youtube videos for reading poems loudly.
5. Teachers should teach figurative language to help students understand the poem's meaning. While some poems require very basic surface level understanding, some other poems are difficult to grasp what the poet is really trying to say. Poets often use poetic devices like metaphors, similes, onomatopoeia, alliteration, idioms, and other figurative language. So, the teacher needs to teach students the meaning of these kinds of figurative language in order to grasp the deeper meaning and to think a poem critically.
6. To increase students' love for poetry a teacher should create an environment where students are encouraged to write their own poems. Students should be allowed to experience the fun of writing their own poems about what pleases their minds. After writing of the poems students should be asked to share their poems in the poetry display corner, in social media etc. This will definitely help in encouraging students to write poetry as well as to love poetry.

Conclusion:

These are the few steps that a teacher of English poetry can follow in the classroom in order to teach a poem effectively. The steps seem to be helpful in teaching a poem literary as well as various language skills through the teaching of the poem. However, no teacher ever uses one method alone. In planning and teaching a poetry course, a teacher will draw on many techniques, but the best course will include more learner-centered than teacher-centered methods.

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