PEDAGOGICAL GUIDELINES FOR POETRY TEACHING IN EFL CONTEXTS

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the methods and classroom strategies which can make the teaching of poetry in EFL Literature classes a valuable learning achievement and an enjoyable literary experience. Unfortunately, in our literature classes, a careful analysis of learners' needs is often neglected and the teaching methodology is usually traditional and, thus, ignores an active interaction among students. In addition, due to a traditional teacher-centered teaching methodology, students' attitudes and goals in terms of literary competence and linguistic skills are not taken into consideration in curriculum design. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to suggest materials design and class syllabus which may accommodate students' linguistic and literary needs.

Discussion

First and foremost, the poetry teacher should be aware of a very dangerous misconception about poetry: the assumption that students, especially EFL students, dislike or even hate poetry. In practice, in many EFL teaching environments, poetry is greatly enjoyed and appreciated by literature and language students alike. Beth S. Neman (1995) believes that the appeal of poetry to all students "seems to be archetypal, tied up in some way with the fundamental nature of humanity" (1995: 461). Thus, if we approach our poetry teaching classes with a firm belief in this universal appeal and with a positive assumption about every student's potential to enjoy, understand, and appreciate poetry, we will discover that poetry classes will become a very delightful and rewarding experience for our students. As Proal Heart Well (2002) observes, "Poetry has the power to affect us in powerful ways of course" (2002: 29). Pointing to the fact that each

individual might have a different taste with regards to the different types of poetry, Heart Well further asserts that, "As teachers, it is our jobs to make sense of these disparate perceptions and guide the students toward a visceral experience" of the sublime energy in poetry (2002: 29).

Text-section

Materials design and lesson planning mentioned in this paper are intended for intermediate level students as the researchers feel that this level may best represent most of our EFL and/or Literature students in our poetry classes, i.e. students who have already attained an intermediate English proficiency and literary competence. Thus, having in mind that the students are already familiar with the intermediate level of literary competence, the poems which are to be selected, should as Benton (1999) holds: "... feature a range of form and style and use language in imaginative, precise original ways" (1999: 525). The length and linguistic complexity of the poems should be determined according to the time the teacher allocates to the analysis of each single poem. Therefore, a poem should not be so short and simple that the teacher feels it has very little to offer to the students. As to the historical era, a mixture of contemporary and traditional poems can be a good selection because both contemporary and traditional poetry have their own special teaching aspects to offer. Contemporary poetry, unlike prose, has not necessarily become progressively more intelligible as John Povey asserts: "much contemporary poetry with its convoluted structure and highly esoteric metaphors can be more difficult than traditional verse, for all its apparent artificially of fancy rhyme schemes and meter" (P. 165). Some poems with historical hints and narrative elements which offer a connecting thread that aids comprehension can be added to the poetry syllabus.

Classroom techniques and teaching strategies

Stage I. Poetry Jamboree

According to Neman, a poetry Jamboree can create a joyful learning environment:

We can demonstrate to our students the truth of our assumption that poems can give them pleasure by simply providing them the opportunity to experience that pleasure for themselves in a poetry Jamboree, a free reading of favorite poems (1995: 491).

A free and joyful reading of students and teacher's favorite poems can provide an opportunity to experience the pleasure of poetry. The teacher must make plenty of books available to the students to choose from. This poetry Jamboree is just for fun and should be held in a relaxed atmosphere. Those students who are willing to read their selections aloud may do so. If some are reluctant, we should not insist, but instead read the poems for them. The poetry Jamboree must be led in the introductory sessions of the poetry course to warm up the students to the joy and also accessibility of appreciating and understanding poems.

At this stage, elaborate and mature interpretation and literary analysis of the poems are not necessary. It is sufficient to respond freely to the poems and encourage our students to do so as well. The aim of a poetry Jamboree, as mentioned above, is to give the students a delightful experience with poetry and prepare them for further serious tasks concerning studying poetry.

Stage II. The Reading Stage

After our students have been exposed to a variety of poems during the Jamboree, the teacher can then confront the students with the question, "what is a poem?" By challenging the students to offer a definition for poetry, the teacher with the help of students can come up with some characteristics and features which make poetry distinct from other literary forms such as prose and drama. John Noell Moore (2002) recites his own experience of such activity in the classroom and states that: "I got some surprisingly good answers to that one, the poetry in the classroom rhapsodizing on their favorite pastime" (2002: 44). Students eventually come to the conclusion that basically the only qualities that really seem to differentiate all poetry from prose are:

1. Poetry utilizes a sound pattern which is more rhythmic and regulated.
2. Poetry uses a language which is more imaginative than the ordinary use of language.

At this stage, the teacher can begin with the first poem in his/her poetry syllabus. As mentioned above, selected poems in the syllabus should be of a suitable length and complexity to have the potential of a fruitful discussion in one or two class sessions. The poem can be assigned to the students prior to the classroom reading for a pre-reading stage when they can study the vocabulary items and practice reading the poem aloud for themselves.

In-class reading may include the students' and teacher's participation in the reading the poem aloud. However, John Povey believes that:

> The best way to begin is with an oral reading by the teacher, as this supplies certain evidence of tone and meaning through the oral interpretation. This may subsequently be followed by another reading that is accompanied by the students' reading along silently in their texts. In this manner they reinforce their ears with the vision of the written word and develop readings as well as aural reading (1979: 167).

Moreover, Lewis Cobbs (2005) also believes that the practice of reading the poems aloud would be very beneficial to the overall communication of emotions and experience in the process of poetry teaching. He asserts that, "as we begin to practice recognizing repetitions and echoes of consonants and vowel, students enjoy a short detour into linguistics that involves dissenting the sounds of English" (2005: 29).

The objective of this stage is to make the poem comprehensible and linguistically accessible to the students. "With the overall impression of the poem established", Povey asserts, "it is necessary to work through it at the very factual level... The first stage requires examination almost line by line to elucidate actual functional meaning"

(1979: 168). At this level, the language of the poem will be examined. Questions concerning the language usage and the basic imagery of the poems would be posed. When the teacher feels that the students are comfortable with the overall meaning of the poem, he/she may move to the next stage which is the close reading and analysis of the poem.

Stage III. Analysis of the Poem

There are at least two basic approaches to the analysis of the poem. One approach suggests teaching the elements of poetry first and then asking the students to apply their formal knowledge of these elements to the poem. The second approach favors working through the close reading of a number of good poems and including a systematic consideration of the imagery and the sound of language. The researchers' experience with Iranian poetry students has led to the belief that a mixture of these two approaches is more useful.

According to Neman (1995), "knowledge of imagery, which can give students a feeling for metaphor and a sense of the exciting possibilities and color offered by the variety of metaphorical structures traditional to poetry written in English, greatly enhances our students' potential as skillful writers and readers of poems" (1995: 468). Helping students to understand the language of poetry involves teaching the figurative meaning of the poem and discussing the figurative uses of language. Figurative terms such as imagery, metaphor, simile, symbol, and similar items of figurative usage are dealt with in this stage by applying their functions in the poem. Gillian Lazar (1993) suggests a useful task for the teaching of items of figurative language; in one specific example, this task is applied to teaching metaphor:

a) Here is a definition of the word *metaphor*. Can you complete it by filling in the two missing words?
 A metaphor is a.... (i) made between two essentially .... (ii) things by identifying one with the other.

b) In each of the following examples there is at least one metaphor. Read carefully through the examples and then answer the questions about them which follow. (1993: 104)

Thus, single lines of poems are examined for metaphorical uses and implications. Other relevant tasks can be practiced in this stage. The teacher can help the students interpret metaphors by drawing on their own individual associations. Another task can be giving students some lines of a poem, from which a certain number of words – in this case metaphor – have been removed. Students are asked to predict what words could go in the blanks. Afterwards, students' answers are compared and discussed and eventually compared with the original words in the poem. Similar teaching strategies can be applied to teaching other items of figurative language.

The next step in this stage is helping students with the poetic form, diction and style. Critics and literature teachers offer various opinions about teaching technical details of the poetic form. Kenneth Koch, for example, in *Teaching children to write poetry* (1970) does not approve of confronting students with the technical aspects of meter, rhyme, and rhythm. He believes legitimate poetic forms that do not involve meter and rhyme can create a more creative approach to the comprehension and appreciation of poetry. Thus, instead of teaching technical aspects of meter, he engages his students in a series of games which practice a repetitive based task; that is, students are asked to work on repetition of a word in a line, repetition of a phrase, repetition of a certain kind of content, and repetition of a rhetorical device. In this way, students acquire the skill of making rhyme and rhythm instead of being lectured about them. Such activity basically is concerned with the cooperative participation of the students in the process of learning so that the overall process would not be a unilateral path between the teacher and the student. Bernard Chemwei (2005) believes that, "The cooperative learning as an instructional methodology can be a starting point because it may provide better opportunities for students to develop skills in group interaction that are needed in today's world" (2005: 25).

John Povey (1979) suggests a more direct approach to teaching the technical aspects of the poetic form. He believes our students "have already been so thoroughly indoctrinated with the belief that poetry in English is defined by its regularity of rhythm and rhyme that they will feel unhappy if this element is not discussed" (1979: 166). Therefore, he suggests that the teacher must offer this technical

information fairly quickly; for example, indicating what constitutes rhyme in English, i.e. a pair of similar sound differing only in their initial consonants. Similar strategies are suggested for teaching meter, alliteration, and assonance. What is significant in helping the students with the poetic form is that students become familiarized with the sound patterns in English and get to know English as a stress-limited language. Here, again, a close analysis of the sound patterns of the selected poem works better than a class lecture on sound effective devices. Useful tasks at this stage can involve sound exercises. Charles Rathbone (1965) has devised a series of what he calls "soundful games, listening contests, and exercises that call on the ear to be discriminating." Among these soundful games are making lists of onomatopoetic words, of interesting words of more than six syllables, writing onomatopoetic sentences – long sentences that try to catch the sound of the actual pace of an event – and also contrasting sentence sounds. These exercises are devised to make students comfortable with the sound patterns and stress scheme in English language. That proves to what Gayle Levy (2001) asserts that "... the onomatopoeias can enrich the classroom experience" (2001: 141).

Stage IV. Interpretation and Literary Appreciation

At this stage, two objectives are sought simultaneously, remembering that poetry is read for its emotional, intellectual and sensual impact. Thus, both thematic comprehension and literary appreciation and enjoyment are our objectives. A close reading of the poem is required to further decode the linguistic complexity of the poem. Because of the density and compactness of a poem, this close reading assumes a particular significance. The teacher should read the poem aloud again and have the students listen carefully. Students should consider how the sound of the poem contributes to the meaning of the poem. The poem should be studied both literally and thematically. For careful literal consideration, the meaning of every word should be defined, both denotatively and connotatively. The syntax of the poem should also be straightened out, so that students understand what each sentence of the poem mean.

At this level, the poetic analysis of the elements of the poem such as metaphors, imagery, and sound patterns which was done in

the previous stage can aid the interpretation. Students should be asked to examine the relationship between the poetic form and thematic meaning. The teacher should ask the students, what exactly is the comparison? What does the poet mean by employing any usual play of rhythm or diction? Why does he break the logical order of the words?

This close reading can also indicate the appropriateness of the tone to the thematic meaning of the poem. And finally, students with the help of the teacher can determine how the form contributes to the meaning of the poem. In addition to the linguistic analysis and interpreting the poetic devices of the poem, the study of the historical and cultural background of the poem may also help the students' comprehension. It is also useful to infer the attitude of the poet to his or her theme, in responding to the figurative meanings in the poem. Here, Gillian Lazar (1993) suggests that, "the theme of the poem should somehow be made relevant to the students' personal experience as they can draw on this when grappling with its underlying meaning" (1993: 103).

Stage V. Extended Activities

For the assigned poems, structured assignments are useful. The teacher can provide students with pre-reading questions and ask them to prepare oral or short writing assignments in response to them. At more advanced levels, students may be asked to prepare written critical evaluation of the poem. Students can also be asked to predict the theme of the poem from its title or a few key words or phrases in the poem. Moreover, students or small groups of students can be assigned to research about the historical or cultural background to the poem and also the poet's life and philosophy of poetry. And as Lazar suggests, "more literary-minded students could be given information about the genre of the poem or the literary movement to which the author belongs" (1993: 129).

More advanced assignments may include rewriting the poem as a different form of discourse. With enthusiastic students, the teacher may even encourage the students to write their own poem, using the original as a model. This is the ultimate suggestion that Tonya Perry

(2006) refers to, "teachers of literature and reading have an incredible responsibility to help students understand and connect to the text..... one way of engaging the students in understanding poetry is to have them write poetry before they analyze it" (2006: 110). Of course, such method can be applied basically with the upper levels of English literature students who have already built a sense of literary competence. Therefore, the ultimate end of such an activity is that, in Perry's words, "We want the students to know the quality work, to embrace the power of poetic language" (2006: 112).

Conclusion

The various stages suggested for teaching poetry are aimed at providing practical devices and insights for implementing strategies in EFL literature-teaching environments. The teacher's unvarying objective should be to modify the students' attitude towards studying poetry and make poetry reading fun. Any literature teaching methodology chosen should emphasize the delightful nature of literature because literature and specially poetry is written to be enjoyed first and foremost and then interpreted thematically and critically. The teachers should strive to make poetry teaching classes a pleasurable and delightful experience and at the same time a rewarding academic and critical achievement.

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