

# STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF POETRY IN SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

By

ARDESHIR DANESH \*

SERVAT SHIRKHANI \*\*

\* Faculty of Foreign Languages, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran.

\*\* Faculty of Foreign Languages, Khorram Abad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Khorram Abad, Iran.

## ABSTRACT

*This study investigates learners' attitudes towards poetry in foreign language learning. 63 Engineering Students at Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch attended the study. The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire designed by the researchers for the purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions regarding the subjects' attitudes towards poetry. The analysis of the data revealed that while the students are mostly interested in Persian poetry, only about one third are interested in English poetry. Therefore, their lack of interest in English poetry can be due to their problem in reading English poetry which has been confirmed by the analysis of their answers to a related item on the questionnaire. Based on the results of the study, the subjects do not strongly relate their inability in understanding English poetry to any of the reasons referred to in the questionnaire, i.e. containing a lot of new words, being based on a different culture, and not understanding Persian poetry. Despite their lack of interest and understanding in English poetry, a considerable percent of the students believe that English poetry helps the development of various aspects of the foreign language.*

*Keywords: Poetry, Language Teaching, Learner Attitudes, Literature.*

## INTRODUCTION

Learners' attitudes and their role in language learning have been emphasized a lot in the literature. These attitudes may include attitudes towards the foreign language, the language teacher, the classroom, the speakers of the foreign language, or towards types of materials used for teaching the language. Poetry is one type of material which has been suggested by different authorities to be integrated with language teaching. Obviously, the learners' attitudes towards poetry play a major role in the success of this integration of poetry with language teaching. If learners have a positive attitude towards English poetry, the use of poetry as a type of teaching material can benefit learners. On the other hand, if they have negative attitudes towards it, poetry may not help language teaching and learning noticeably.

### 1. Review of the Related Literature

#### 1.1 Attitudes

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines attitude as the opinions and feelings that one has about

someone or something, especially, as this influences one's behavior. Also Shajahan and Shajahan (2007) refer to attitude as a learned predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to give object.

#### 1.2 The Importance of Learners' Attitudes

The role of learners' attitudes towards different aspects of language, language learning, and the language classroom in learning a second/foreign language has been widely discussed in the literature. Baker (1993) states that learners with positive attitudes will spend more effort to learn the language through using strategies such as asking questions, volunteering and answering questions. Learners' attitudes are also important because based on Spolsky's framework (Brown, 2000) they determine the type and amount of learner motivation. Motivation, in turn affects the way the individual makes use of the learning opportunities in both formal and informal situations. These advantages of learners' positive attitudes indicate that as SitiNorliana (2008) asserts attitudes can influence both the rate of development and the final achievement of learners in the target language.

### *1.3 Poetry in Language Teaching*

For some time, literature was kept away from language teaching practices despite the major role it had in the field. Widdowson (1982) asserts that the prominence of literature faded as a result of linguistics' becoming the focal point of language programs. Linguists had different reasons for trying to exclude literature from language teaching. Topping (1968), for instance, argues that literature should be kept away from foreign language programs because it has structural complexity, does not conform to standard grammatical rules, and has remote control perspective (Turker, 1991).

Recently, there has been a return to the integration of literature, including poetry, into the language teaching practice while even now there are people opposing the use of literature in language teaching. Some disagree with the usefulness of literature in language programs because as Turker (1991) states they believe it is heavy, repetitive and to some extent redundant; is of little or no relevance to his immediate needs; and provides little opportunity for creativity. Moreover, some authors believe that literature is not appropriate for students of all levels. Turker (1991), for example, maintains that literature is frustrating for students at the intermediate level who are able to partially understand but unable to respond.

Despite disadvantages only a few of which are referred to here, much has been said regarding the benefits of literature in language teaching which make it more useful than other sources for language teaching in many different situations. The negative consequences of excluding literature from language teaching programs have been discussed by a number of scholars, including Povey (1967) and Widdowson (1975). Also, Finch (2003) stresses that by emphasizing enjoyment and presenting poetry "through media and methods that provide maximum student involvement and interest" (Brindley, 1980, p. 1, in Finch, 2003), language learning can be facilitated and also learners at all levels can use poetry as a medium to express themselves in the target language. Moreover, Povey (1967) asserts that literature has extensive and connotative vocabulary and a complex syntax through which it can develop all language skills.

Also some have discussed the cultural advantages of studying literature. Literature is referred to as a mirror of national culture (Turker, 1991) and Adeyanju (1978) believes that as such literature can familiarize students with the nation's aesthetic, moral and spiritual values as well as the rules of the social system.

Proponents of the integration of literature with language teaching have tried to answer the criticisms made by the opponents. Povey (1967) maintains that the linguistic difficulty of literature has been overstated. He asserts that for gaining something from a text, students are not required to comprehend it fully. Also, Akyel and Yalcin (1990) maintain that the poetry syllabus as part of the program should be carefully selected and the aim should be encouraging the students to enjoy poems before their possible analysis. Arthur (1968) believes that if we want to make literature a successful part of an ESL program, we must find ways of making literature both useful and enjoyable. Turker (1991) asserts that the students' frustration is due to their noninvolvement because teaching poetry is a one-sided process in which the students are static participants. Elsewhere, Khatib (2011) concludes that students fail to understand and appreciate English poetry mainly because of inappropriate selection of materials and ineffective ways of teaching.

### *1.4 Attitudes Towards Poetry*

Poetry has many advantages which make it more effective than a lot of other sources of language teaching in various contexts. However, it should be kept in mind that the learners' attitudes toward poetry significantly influence the success of any language teaching program which attempts to use poetry as a type of teaching material. A number of authorities (e.g. Khatib, 2011) maintain that a lot of university students do not like English poetry and even a majority of them have a negative attitude towards it. The results of the study by Akyel and Yalcin (1990) indicate that students view poetry as not having much effect on language skills and making the least significant contribution to the development of language skills among literary genres. Also Hirvela and Boyle (1988) study the attitudes of Hong Kong Chinese students and the results show that only 6% of the students were interested in poetry

more than other literary genres and for 73% of them poetry was the most difficult literary genre.

The significance of studying learners' attitudes lies in the fact that attitudes do not remain static. Attitudes are complex constructs (Baker, 1988) that are often shaped by the social context, "develop early in childhood and are the result of parents and peers' attitudes" (Brown, 2000, p.180). According to SitiNorliana (2008), attitudes can be changed through the learning process, for example by using appropriate materials and teaching techniques. They also improve as a result of language learning as learners who learn well will acquire positive attitudes (SitiNorliana, 2008).

Accordingly, learners' attitudes toward poetry can be changed if the origins of negative attitudes are known and if as Brown (2000) states the learners are exposed to reality. Inappropriate selection of texts and ineffective ways of teaching (Khatib, 2011) and ignoring the learners' response and their personal exchange with the literary text (Arthur, 1968) are among the reasons for learners' aversion from literature.

## 2. Methodology

This study aims at investigating the attitudes of Iranian University students towards the effectiveness of using poetry in the EFL classrooms.

### 2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 63 Engineering students at Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch. They were freshmen aged 18 to 23. In order to choose the participants, first among 8 classes of General English in the Medical College, four classes were selected randomly. Then among the students of the four classes, who were 119 students, 63 were chosen based on the results of an English proficiency test given to all students of the four classes.

### 2.2 Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to gather the required data for this study. These instruments are as follows:

- The first instrument was a version of NELSON proficiency test which was used to select the most homogeneous students from among the selected classes.
- The second instrument used in the study was a questionnaire designed by the researchers for the

purpose of this study. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions regarding the subjects' attitudes towards poetry. The questions were on a Lickert scale ranging from 1 to 5, where 1=Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, and 5= Strongly agree.

### 2.3 Procedure

The first step in this study was to select and prepare the required instruments for data collection of the study. An edition of NELSON proficiency test was selected as the test of homogeneity and a questionnaire was designed and prepared by the researchers for examining the Iranian students' attitude toward the effectiveness of poetry development of four different aspects of language (i.e. vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and writing). The questionnaire was piloted with 33 students with the same characteristics as the participants of the study. The index of reliability of the questionnaire was found to be 69.9. Moreover, based on the results of piloting a few modifications were made to the items of the questionnaire.

In the next stage, the participants of the study were selected. In order to choose the participants, first among 8 classes of General English in the Medical College at one of the branches of Islamic Azad University in Tehran, four classes were selected randomly. Then among the 119 students of the four classes, 63 were chosen based on the results of an English proficiency test given to all students of the four classes. The selected participants were asked to answer the attitude questionnaire.

## 3. Results

The collected data was analyzed using SPSS 20.

### 3.1 Descriptive Statistics for NELSON Grades

First descriptive statistics was conducted for NELSON test results; the Mean and the Standard Deviation were computed to find the most homogeneous group of subjects for the study (See Table 1.).

Using the information given in Table 1 participants falling two standard deviations below and above the Mean of the scores (those scoring between 38.41 and 45.07) were chosen as the most homogeneous participants. Based on the identified range, out of 119 participants taking the NELSON test, 63 were chosen as the main participants of

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
NELSON	119	41.74	6.65
Valid N	119		

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for NELSON Grades

the study.

### 3.2 Characteristics of the Attitude Questionnaire

Using SPSS, reliability of the scores on the questionnaire given to 33 students with similar characteristics as the subjects of the study was computed. The reliability turned out to be 69.9 which was acceptable for the purpose of the study. Based on the results of the piloting some trivial changes to a few of the items seemed to improve the quality of the questionnaire and these items were thus modified.

### 3.3 Students' Attitudes Towards English Poetry in Language Classrooms

In order to examine students' attitudes toward different aspects of the use of poetry in language teaching, the percentage with which each of the 5 choices for each of the items of the 5-point Likert scale questionnaire were computed. In order to avoid ambiguity caused by using numerous tables in the paper, all the results are summarized in Table 2.

#### 3.3.1 Students' Interest in Persian and English Poetry

The first two items were concerned with the subjects' interest in Persian (their native language) and English poetry, respectively. 82 percent of the subjects mentioned that they were interested in Persian poetry and only 8 percent were not interested. The analysis of the second item revealed that while 36.5 percent were interested in English poetry, about 32 percent were not.

#### 3.3.2 Effectiveness of Poetry in the Development of the Various Aspects of English Language

The next five items dealt with the advantages of English poetry to English learners. The first four items of the five were concerned with the role of poetry in developing language components and skills. 54 percent of the students agreed that poetry helps the development of vocabulary and only around 14 disagreed. Only around 32 percent agreed that poetry can lead to the development of grammar while about 30 percent disagreed. 46 percent agreed that

poetry is helpful in developing reading comprehension and only 19 disagreed. Also 35 percent agreed that poetry can result in the development of writing ability and 27 disagreed. The last item of this group dealt with the role of poetry in developing students' understanding of the foreign culture. Around 46 percent agreed that poetry helps learners understand the foreign culture and 19 percent disagreed.

#### 3.3.3 Students' Attitudes Towards the (in)ability in Reading English Poetry

The next four items were concerned with the students' attitude towards their ability to read English poetry and the reasons for their failure in this regard. Around 56 percent of the students agreed that they had problem reading English poetry and about 24 percent disagreed. Around 35 percent agreed that their problem in reading English poetry is because it has a lot of new words and about 38 percent disagreed. Around 24 percent agreed that they have problem reading English poetry because it is based on a different culture than their culture and about 43 percent disagreed. 8 percent agreed that they have problem reading English poetry because they cannot even understand Persian poetry and about 70 percent disagreed. This is closely linked to the answers to item 1 which was related to the subjects' interest in the Persian poetry.

#### 3.3.4 Students' Attitudes Towards the Motivating Role of English Poetry

The last item of the questionnaire was "My interest in English poetry has encouraged me to learn more English" with which around 30 percent agreed and around 38 percent disagreed.

### 3.4 Discussion

The results of the study have interesting implications for teachers who like to use poetry as a type of EFL teaching materials.

According to the results, while the students are mostly interested in Persian poetry, only about one third of them are interested in English poetry. This implies that their lack of interest in English poetry can be due to their problem in reading English poetry rather than their aversion from

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
0									1.6	1.6	1.6	1.6
1	7.9	15.9	3.2	7.9	7.9	11.1	9.5	7.9	1.6	14.3	42.9	20.6
2		15.9	11.1	22.2	11.1	15.9	9.5	15.9	36.5	28.6	27.0	17.5
3	9.5	31.7	31.7	38.1	34.9	38.1	34.9	20.6	25.4	31.7	20.6	30.2
4	23.8	25.4	28.6	20.6	23.8	17.5	33.3	25.4	20.6	14.3	4.8	20.6
5	58.7	11.1	25.4	11.1	22.2	17.5	12.7	30.2	14.3	9.5	3.2	9.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

**Table 2. Frequencies for the answers on the Lickert Scale**

poetry in general. This interpretation has been confirmed by the analysis of the subjects' answers to item 8 through which only 24 percent have disagreed that they have problem reading English poetry and around 56 percent agreed they had problem reading English poetry.

The analysis of the next set of items indicates that students believe that poetry can be effective in developing vocabulary, reading comprehension, and understanding of the foreign culture, but not that much helpful in expanding grammar and their writing ability. This implies that the students' attitudes are based on the way poetry is worked on, if at all, in English classrooms. Usually in English classrooms which use poetry, the students are required to learn word meanings and make comprehension of the poetry, but not to write in English neither to consider the grammaticality of the constructions in the poetry.

As mentioned the results of this part of the questionnaire imply that the Engineering students are aware of some of the advantages of poetry in the EFL classroom. Along with their awareness, their interest in Persian poetry indicates that if their problems in reading English poetry are removed, they will welcome the use of poetry in English teaching classes.

The analysis of the items relating to the students' attitudes towards the origins of their problems in reading English poetry indicate that they do not strongly relate their inability in understanding English poetry to any of the reasons referred to in the questionnaire, i.e. containing a lot of new words, being based on a different culture, and not understanding Persian poetry. This implies that language teachers should seek other reasons for the students'

problem in reading English poetry. Among such problems are inappropriate selection of texts, ineffective ways of teaching (Khatib, 2011), and ignoring the learners' response and their personal exchange with the literary text (Arthur, 1968).

## Conclusion

Literary materials, in general, and poetry, in particular, can be used as effective sources of authentic materials in language teaching classrooms. In addition to having all the necessary components to be taught in language classes, literary materials interest many language learners. The problem, however, is that many students may not be as good at reading poetry as they are at reading nonliterary texts. So, teachers can introduce English poetry into their classrooms with an awareness that their students may face problems in using the materials and thus with the readiness to tackle probable problems. This way, language teachers can make the language teaching more interesting and easier for many of their learners.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Ardeshir Danesh is currently pursuing PhD in Applied Linguistics and a Faculty member at Islamic Azad University, Iran. He has published a number of Books and Articles in the field of EFL. His area of interest includes Second Language Teaching and Language Assessment.*



*Servat Shirkhani is currently pursuing PhD in Applied Linguistics and a Faculty member at Islamic Azad University, Iran. She has presented Articles at both National and International Conferences, and has published a number of Books and Articles. Her area of interest includes CALL, Inter-language Pragmatics, and Language Assessment.*

