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WHY AND HOW TO USE A POEM IN ELT CLASSROOM

Review Study

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Abstract

Besides numerous positive transformations and unique opportunities in language pedagogy, the post-method era brought with itself several challenges for language teachers. After intensive research and empirical studies, the use of literature was welcomed in ELT classrooms. But the question arises as to what extent and in what ways does literature support language learning? In an attempt to answer these questions and fill this lacuna, the present paper highlights ways in which literature assist language teachers. Moreover, the paper presents resourceful strategies to frame exercises using poems for ELT classroom. Shakespeare's *Sonnet 65* is used to illustrate some vital themes explored in this paper. In spite of the observed difficulty level of the sonnet and the layers of meaning it encapsulates, dynamic and engaging activities can be crafted out of this poem. Since the elements discussed in this study are ubiquitous to the genre of poetry, therefore the use of the presented methodology would also be universal.

Keywords: Teaching methodologies, literature, sonnet, language teaching, ELT

1. Introduction

By nature, humans feel more affinity towards things that draw their attention and thus are likely to enjoy such things better. In a language teaching setting, literature is one of the means to lure the learners. To put it simply, literature make language more palatable. Different genres of literature serve this purpose, be it prose, verse or drama — fiction or non-fiction. Each of them has the tendency to engage and motivate students more profoundly and at the same time open avenues to improve multiple language constructs. They are a good source to provide supplementary materials for grammar, vocabulary as well as translation (Liaw, 2001 as cited in Khatib, Hossein, & Rahimi, 2012). Besides serving students, it also serves teachers in making their lessons holistic, thus, giving a better learning outcome. "Novels, short stories, fables, poems, and plays are to be used for language teaching, as a literary experience is also a language experience" (Arthur, 1968).

Language teaching classrooms have been indifferent towards the use of literature as a teaching methodology (Carter, 2007) since the downfall of the grammar-translation method. Early approaches focused on the contextual use of language and so the syllabi were functional/notional in nature (Brumfit, 1985). Thus, there was no scope for creativity in language teaching.

The dawn of the communicative teaching approach marked the revised consideration of literature and its various use to integrate it into language curriculum (Bobkina & Dominguez, 2014). But still, it was often claimed that literary texts shift the focus from actual language teaching (Edmondson, 1997). As a result, this assimilation has been discouraged due to the complex nature of literary text having stylistic, lexical, structural as well as cultural density (McKay, 1982; Savvidou, 2004). For decades, the debate revolved around this issue of emphasizing the role of literature in language classroom. Eventually, its significance received consideration (Amer, 2003; Erkaya, 2005; Maley, 2001; McKay, 2001), but its praxis still needs substantial support (Lima, 2005).

1.1. Purpose of the Study

The reluctance of English language teachers to the use of literature in classroom teaching continues due to the lack of innovative ideas of incorporating literary texts effectively. Thus, the objective of this study is to recommend viable ways of using literature in English teaching classrooms. Along with providing a comprehensive rationale for teaching each language construct, the study aims to exemplify methods of using a poem in ELT classroom for stimulating teaching and learning process. For this purpose, the study uses Shakespeare's *Sonnet 65* as a model to craft exercises and suggestions for language skill development. A similar prototype can be applied for framing exercises from other texts, as the elements discussed in this paper are universal throughout the genre of poetry.

1.2. Research Questions

This paper addresses the following research questions:

- How to use poem in ELT classroom?
- What language constructs can be taught with a poem?
- What is the extent to which classic literary texts address language teaching needs?

1.3. Methodology

To answer these questions the present study adopts explanatory approach with descriptive research method.

2. Using Poetry for Language Teaching

More precisely, poetry has been abandoned by language teachers (Denman, 1988) as it is seen as a complex literary component and also due to the lack of methodologies to present it to language learners (Štulajterová, 2010). Although, “poetry is the genre most English teachers seem least comfortable with” (Lockward, 1994 p.65), but this genre when brought into a language classroom, becomes a massive repertoire of several intricate elements essential for any language course. Saraç (2003) elucidates a number of advantages for using poetry for language teaching. He explains that besides assisting the advancement of aesthetics among the learners, literature contribute to educational benefits as well by providing opportunities for considering novel usage of grammar, syntax, text organization as well as vocabulary. It also familiarizes learners with literary devices in a very casual manner (as cited in Hismanoglu, 2005). Moreover, a poem obliges learners to integrate language skills in order to make meaning of the text. It makes them adapt reading strategies and practice them to deal with peculiar features of verse, while broadening their intellect along with developing appreciation for foreign language (Nasr, 2001).

A key argument here is what Reeves (1963) points out – an interplay of four elements while teaching a poem – the learners, the poem to be taught, methods employed and importantly the role of the teacher (as cited in Khansir, 2012). Thus, teachers need to be sagacious enough while dealing with a poem. They must equip themselves with innovative methods and strategies to frame engaging tasks, parallel to the competence of the learners while keeping intact the true nature of the poem as well.

Following are the elements, some of which are exemplified through William Shakespeare's ‘*Sonnet 65*’ – Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea..., that can be implemented in ELT classroom. Such a framework could possibly facilitate the use of literature in a more feasible and motivating way.

2.1. Pronunciation

Phonemic awareness is necessary for correct pronunciation. Intelligibility massively relies on how words are pronounced. Since, a poem is meant to be ‘read’, this crucial aspect of language can be brought into focus. Making the students narrate a poem can act as an excellent platform to work on their articulation of different phonemes. It acts as a means to promote understanding of the “phonics of English” (Collins, 2008). In the poem words like ‘Wrackful’ /rækful/, ‘battering’ /'batərɪŋ/, ‘impregnable’ /ɪm'prɛgnəbl/ or ‘siege’ /si:dʒ/ could be challenging for students. Such words can be helpful in making them aware of silent letters, correct use of /ŋ/, the occurrence of syllabic consonants as well as in making a distinction between spelling and pronunciation. Also, students can be made to work on exercises of syllable division along with transcription and pronunciation.

2.2. Vocabulary

Teaching of vocabulary is a crucial aspect of language literacy as it makes up around 70% to 80% of comprehension (Nagy & Scott, 2000 and Pressley 2002). Moreover, teaching vocabulary efficiently is a significant aspect of developing successful readers. Greenwood (2004) pertinently states, “There is a great divide between what we know about vocabulary instruction and what we (often, still) do” (p. 28). But explicit vocabulary instruction in the CLT context is often not possible, especially with adult learners. Here, using poems can work as a means to enrich vocabulary. They are a great source for familiarizing students with an extensive vocabulary and its usage (Povey, 1972 as cited in McKay, 1982). Asking students to make out meaning of the words from the context or by using supplementary materials can help them to expand their knowledge of vocabulary. Words like – wrackful, battering, siege, impregnable, can help in building students’ vocabulary as these words are rarely encountered in other texts that are used in ELT classrooms.

2.3. Promoting Language Skills

Poetry not only serves as a model of language, but also acts as a medium for improving language skills, viz. listening, speaking, reading, and writing because it engages students' both reception and expression, thus, serving as a catalyst in the development of students' language skills. As asserted by Hedge (2000), poems work as authentic material and can be used to enhance the receptive skill of reading. Sonnets can provide an excellent opportunity for developing intensive reading skills as well as other sub-skills, like inferencing, summarising, and so on. Moreover, poems can also be used to build writing skills by making students rewrite, report or translate the poem (Sheila, Hessler & Konrad, 2007). Even the use of nursery rhymes like, 'Humpty Dumpty' or 'Jack and Jill' and asking students to write a report of the incidents described in the poem could be an engaging task for them.

2.4. Prosody

A poem can be an effective way and a good resource for teaching rhythm, intonation, stress, and meter. The frequent repetition in a poem enables students to pick up such language patterns. ‘At every reading of a poem, though it may have been familiar from early childhood, some hitherto hidden delicacy of rhythm and intonation may be revealed’ (Hall 1989 p. 68). Shakespeare's sonnets are rich in meter and therefore, can be very helpful for teachers while preparing their lessons. They can familiarise students with rhyme scheme and meter and then ask them to identify in the following poem.

Example: *Rhyme Scheme-*

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea	a
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,	b

How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,	a
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?	b
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out	c
Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,	d
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,	c
Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?	d
O fearful meditation! where, alack,	e
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?	f
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?	e
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?	f
O! none, unless this miracle have might,	g
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.	g

Stress and Intonation

For international intelligibility, correct placement of stress and appropriate intonation becomes prerequisite. Students in the EFL/ESL setting should be made to use accurate stress along with proper intonation while narrating poems. Teachers can act as a good role model for instilling vocal expertise in students. Students can also be made to work on exercises of syllable division and word stress placement of words like 'Wrackful' /rækful/, 'battering' /'batərɪŋ/, 'impregnable' /ɪm'prɛgnəbl/ or 'mediation' /mi:di'eɪʃ(ə)n/.

2.5. Deviant Language

Poems also provide learners an exposure to unique sentence structure, variety of forms and novel ways of linking ideas (Riverol, 1991). Since a poem often uses deviant language, students would get a chance to explore this distinctive aspect of language which otherwise is not possible. The use of poems for language learning in this sense is often questioned, as Lasar (1993) points out, "If poetry's deviant language, what's the point of using it with language learners?". The fact that 'deviance' of language is against the 'correct rules' of language, thus the knowledge of deviancy indirectly reinforces learning of correct language use (Zyngier, 1994). The knowledge and use of such language make students grow up as better writers in the future.

2.6. Figurative Language

A poem by its very nature is often full of many literary devices. So, using a poem in a language classroom can be a good way to introduce students to the figurative language. Such knowledge would make the learners proficient in language — spoken, written and in its comprehension. Although, the foremost reason for the exclusion of poetry from language curriculum is the use of figurative language in it, which is often considered as being vague and imprecise (Zelenkova, 2004). What is important here is the methodology through which it should be presented in the ELT classroom and the role assigned to the teacher and the students. An eclectic approach works best situations with known and unknown and where teachers have the freedom to employ different methods of teaching (Ali, 1981).

Example- With the help of the above-mentioned poem, ELT teacher can first explain the literary devices and then make students engage in interesting activities (as peer work or individual tasks) to locate those literary devices in the poem:

- Alliteration- ‘steel so strong’
- Personification- Beauty is personified by giving it the human attribute of ‘holding a plea’ and ‘action’.

Time is personified by attributing it to the quality of having a 'foot' and using 'his' as its referential pronoun.

- Assonance- ‘hand can’
- Consonance- ‘hand hold his’
- Antithesis- ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?’

2.7. Intention and Expectation

Another important yet often ignored aspect is the notion of the author's intention and the reader's expectations. Though poetry encapsulates in itself cultural vagueness (Zelenkova, 2004) which is often challenging to adopt in language classrooms, it can do wonders in teaching students this knack of writing. The basis of any successfully written piece is the accuracy of meaning communicated through words. Students can be taught to be more profound in expressing their intended thoughts yet maintaining brevity and clarity, and who can better serve this purpose than Shakespeare's sonnets.

3. Conclusion

Since the inception of the post-method era, there is an exceeding demand on language instructors to present novel methodologies and distinctive ways of using language learning materials in ELT classroom. The use of literature has indeed provided utmost support in this regard. As M.B. Willmott (1979) puts forth, “Literature demonstrate language at work...it also helps the pupils and stimulates linguistic responses of various kinds. English teachers not only present literature, they also exploit it, because it can generate language as well as exemplify it” (p.57). As highlighted above, poems especially sonnets could also be a catalyst to develop language skills resulting in advancement of competence as well as performance.

This paper suggests framework for using poem to teach various aspects of language development ranging from pronunciation, vocabulary to even the relation between author's intention and reader's expectation. Here, *Sonnet 65* is used for demonstrating pedagogically sound ways for ELT teachers to practice for classroom teaching. A similar framework could be applied for other poems especially sonnets for crafting innovative tasks. Thus, this paper attempts to facilitate the use of classic literary texts in ELT classroom. Every piece of literature that comes into ELT classroom should be closely analysed and made to use to the fullest as it encapsulates in itself immense nuances to work with, keeping learners motivated and engaged.

4. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

5. Ethics Committee Approval

The author confirms that the study does not need ethics committee approval according to the research integrity rules in their country.

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