

Challenges and Solutions in Teaching English through Poetry to EFL Students at Hajjah University: A Case Study of William Wordsworth’s Lucy and John Donne’s Death Poems

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Article Information	Abstract
<p>Article History: Received: 4 September 2019 Accepted: 28 September 2020 Available online: 23 November 2020</p> <p>Keywords: Teaching English Teaching poetry Hajjah University</p>	<p><i>Poetry is an effective and reliable material in teaching English language. It offers astounding opportunities for reading, writing, speaking and listening practices for English learners. Teaching English through poetry has many advantages such as it being of authentic material, being a medium to express emotions and feelings, being a wonderful carrier of culture, and being able to help improve students’ linguistic knowledge and skills. Poetry is often regarded as the most sophisticated genre of literature, comprising a variety of contents that are narrative, lyrical and dramatic in nature. Some of the difficulties teachers face while teaching English through poetry are the students’ proficiency level, the teachers’ method of teaching and the chosen poetry texts. Thus, this paper proposes to explore the advantages of teaching English language through poetry and its challenges at Hajjah University in Yemen, from which suggestions for choosing poetries to teach English will be given with special reference to “Death, be not Proud” and “Lucy”, as well as other suggested teaching methods for students of the Bachelor of Education (English) program at Hajjah University in Yemen.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is an efficacious source that can effectively be used in teaching English language to improve students’ English language skills, including grammar and vocabulary. It deals with human interest, universal themes and offers chances for learners to express their feelings and emotions. Poetry also raises the historical and cultural awareness of learners. However, teaching English through poetry is a difficult task in non-English speaking countries like Yemen where English teachers face many challenges. These challenges originate not only from the students but also from the teacher’s teaching method and the chosen poetry texts. This paper aims to present some advantages of using poetry in teaching English, describe the challenges teachers face in teaching English through poetry at Hajjah University, Yemen, and some reasonable solutions to address these challenges.

Advantages of using poetry in language teaching

Poetry is a rich genre and a beneficial complement. There are many types, including sonnets, descriptive poems, lyrical poems, and narrative poems which can be used in the classroom. Teaching English through poetry has many advantages such as it being authentic in nature, being a medium to express emotions and feelings, being a wonderful carrier of culture and being able to help improve students' linguistic knowledge and skills.

Poetry offers to students "authentic models - real language in context" (Kirkgöz, 2008). In addition, authentic texts make teaching more enjoyable and keep the students closer to the target language culture. Cullinan, Scala, and Schroder (1995) observe that "poetry is especially appropriate for language learning because it contains language used in its most beautiful forms". As a result, students will be able to learn about the structure of language and elements of a sentence and recognize the different techniques for connecting thoughts to improve their performance.

Poetry as the finest literary genre is a good source of teaching language. Using poetry in teaching English may offer an excellent chance for students to learn the four basic language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. It also helps students to develop areas within their linguistic knowledge, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Ezenandu (2012) explains that "Generally, it is [a] source material for the development of literacy skills and the basic language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking." Al-Bakri (2019) adds that "...it (poetry) enhances learners' skills of the language along with their personalities as they become more confident to share their thoughts with others."

Poetry is also a common and universal vehicle of human expression. Using poetry is using language in words, symbols and gestures to express feelings, emotions, thoughts, desires and needs. Because poems deal with universal themes and human concerns, "they offer opportunities for students to project their feelings and emotions, thus fostering personal involvement in learners" (Heath, 1996).

Moreover, poetry is one of the most useful transmitters of cultural knowledge of different nations. It works not only as a mirror that reflects the reality of society but also reflects its culture. Poetry helps students understand different cultures and ideologies, different social behaviour, and opens eyes towards a new world. According to Lazar (1996), "poems also provide students with an insight into developing cross-cultural awareness and this, in turn, will help them in acquiring fluency in the target language." Poetry is important because it makes human beings think and imagine. It opens a new window to not only discover the cultural values, but also the way of life in different cultural contexts. Learning a new language means to learn about a new culture, its beliefs, linguistic patterns, social habits and arts. Hence, poetry, in general, may work to encourage the discourse of tolerance and mitigate cultural differences for both the student and the teacher.

Challenges in teaching English language through poetry at Hajjah University

Yemen, officially the Republic of Yemen, is a country at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula in Western Asia. English is considered a foreign language in Yemen. As an EFL country, the role of teaching English is to equip students with skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening as well as to create an awareness of the role of English as an international language. Ahmed (2018) explains “In recent decades, English has become an indispensable part of the Yemeni primary and secondary school curricula. It is not only a matter of being a compulsory subject within the school curriculum but it is also an area of study that many students/pupils want to develop. Many Yemeni parents have recently recognized the importance of English as a key to the doors of science, technology and business in our modern world and want their children to attain a mastery over English.” Hajjah University is a public university established in 2008. It is a comprehensive university that has four faculties and 25 departments including English. The students of the English Department have to study compulsory courses of English poetry which includes poetries from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries as well as modern poetry. The average number of students per class is about 40-50.

The challenging task which teachers face while teaching the English language through poems is enhancing the sense of value and enjoyment among students who are not interested in poetry. Teaching poetry offers teachers some fundamentals of cognitive and physical skills, which in turn helps them engage the students in the learning process. According to Phillip Mallett (2001), “poetry is the most challenging kind of literary writing.” Because of its figurative language, tough grammar, and complicated structures, it often seems difficult to teach English through poetry.

The challenges in using poetry to teach English major students at Hajjah University can be viewed from three aspects: (i) students’ low proficiency; (ii) teachers using traditional teaching methods; and (iii) the selection of poetry texts. Students who join the English Department at Hajjah University often finish their secondary schools with low proficiency in English, and without any experience in reading poetry texts. Some of them also hail from rural areas where the quality of education is not high. Furthermore, the curricula of Yemeni schools do not meet students’ needs. They basically focus on learning some fundamental skills such as writing and reading. Thus, at the university level, the materials differ much more and the students find themselves facing a more complicated form of language which involves literary theories and different cultures. This sudden shift may cause a sense of frustration for students, resulting in their inability to cope with texts containing figurative language, and complex grammar and sentence structures, of which are common in poetry.

The second aspect is the teacher’s teaching method. The teacher is an essential element in the educational process and their method of teaching plays a leading role in the quality of education. Teaching English through poetry is a difficult task and teachers are the leaders of this task. It has been said that the majority of teachers at Hajjah University follow dated methods in teaching. They offer a ready-made explanation for the poem and sometimes, refuse to accept the learners’ differing viewpoints. Using traditional methods of teaching may thus result in a passive response from the students. In sum, traditional methods deal with the text

as a course for anatomy; the interpretation and analysis are often performed by the teacher while learners are just passive listeners.

According to Al-Refa'ae (2007), "Using a traditional approach while teaching poetry will not help students improve their language and literary skills. Teachers used to teach difficult poems using a teacher-centred approach and test students through questions which promote memorization." This may hinder the intellectual abilities and creativity of the learners. Al-Aghbary (2008) also states "the job for the poetry teacher in a non-native context is to 'exploit' poetry in order to bring out all its educational benefits". Teachers have to adopt new strategies and alternative methods in the classroom that help students to acquire and reinforce both their literary and language skills. Teachers have to invest in the texts to create a variety of language activities.

The third aspect is the selection of a poetry text. It is a major element in the teaching and learning process. The difficulties teachers face in using poetry texts in the language classroom are divided into three types: linguistic complexity, conceptional difficulty and cultural background. The first type of difficulty is linguistic complexity. Linguistic complexity refers to the lexical, semantic and syntactic elements of any poetry text that may come in the way of students learning the language (Yusef, 2017). As poetry is regarded as the most sophisticated and highest form of literature (due to its language norms deviating from Standard English), it often breaks rules of the English language that students have already become familiar with.

The second type of problem in teaching poetry texts is its conceptual difficulty. This refers to the ambiguity and complexity of the concepts within the text. "Conceptual difficulty of the poetry texts is also variable and should be considered carefully. The difficulty level of a poem should suit the level of competence of the learners" (as cited in Çetinavci and Tütüniş, 2012). The third difficulty is the cultural background of the text. It is a huge challenge teachers face in teaching language through poetry. Teachers have to consider students' unfamiliarity with the text's cultural background. Lazar (1993, cited in Yusef, 2017) also comments that "a major difficulty for students reading a poetry text is that its cultural background may seem inaccessible to them."

Suggestions for the selection of poetry texts in teaching English

The selection of the poetry texts is a chief element in the process of teaching English. Indeed, the appropriate selection of poetry texts that meets the teaching objectives is a challenge that teachers face in teaching English through poetry. Poetry could play a vital role in teaching English if it is well-selected. According to Panavelil (2011), "a teacher should be extremely careful while choosing the text that s/he wants to deal with in the classroom. The needs of the students, their motivation, interest, and cultural background should be taken into consideration while selecting a poem for classroom teaching."

Teachers should introduce modern, romantic and lucid poems. They should also consider other criteria such as clarity of topic, simplicity of language, and contextual aspects while selecting poetry texts. The next section will discuss the selection of poetry texts (poems) based on

linguistic, conceptual and cultural aspects. The discussion will use two poems, “*Death, be not proud*” and “*Lucy*”, as a basis for discussion.

Analysis of the two poems across all 3 aspects

Before analysing the two poems, brief descriptions of both “*Death, be not Proud*”- and “*Lucy*” will be provided. (See Appendix for full poems.)

“*Death, be not Proud*” as an old English poem is a Holy sonnet and one of the finest poems by John Donne and belongs to the genre of metaphysical poetry. Metaphysical poetry is characterized by its spiritual, philosophical, and religious subject matters and rigid expressions. “*Death, be not Proud*” is marked by its highly intellectual and frequent paradoxes, strange imagery, and contains complex beliefs. Because of its logical argument, it perplexes the mind instead of pleasing the heart. “Donne is regarded as the foremost of the metaphysical poets. His secular poems are vigorous, original and highly rhetorical which are full of passionate thought and intellectual juggling.” (Ray, M. K., 2007). It is a mixture of thoughts and passion. The language of the poem is a little bit different because it includes unfamiliar words such as ‘thee, thou and shalt’. The poem also deals with many figures of speech such as personification, paradox, metaphor, and synecdoche.

“*Lucy*” is one of the best romantic lyric poems by William Wordsworth. Romantic poetry is characterized by the love of nature, glorification of imagination and emotions, and celebration of individualism. Schneider (2007) states “Romantic poetry gave full expression to one of the most important characteristics of Romanticism: love of nature, especially evident in the works of Wordsworth. Romantic writers emphasized emotions, sentiment, and inner feelings in their work”. Nature and imagination are the two elements that dominate the poem, “*Lucy*”. The language of the poem is rather simple and comprehensible — the language of the common man and the style is direct, showing the poet’s emotions. Figures of speech found are metaphors, simile and alliteration.

Linguistic complexity

“*Death, be not proud*” is written in a classical metaphysical form that is characterized by its ambiguous and difficult structure, unusual language, and use of Old English vocabulary such as ‘thee’ and ‘thou’. It is very difficult to understand at its first reading. It requires deep focus and complete attention to get to the roots of the matter. Thus, the poem is likely more advanced than the students’ linguistic level.

“*Lucy*” is romantic both in structure and content. It is marked by its simple and imaginative language — an everyday language understood by the common man. The poem is a lyrical piece written in a vernacular and direct form that reflects the feelings and thoughts of the poet. This kind of poetry could be easily understood by a wide range of readers.

Conceptual difficulties

“*Death, be not proud*” reflects the intellectual beliefs of metaphysical philosophy, symbolism and imagery, and literary devices such as paradox and personification. It deals with subjects that are beyond the physical scope. One of the major features of metaphysical poetry is the use of conceit — a far-fetched comparison of two dissimilar things. The poet compares death to a man. The poem is mainly based on a conceptual metaphor known as personification that dominates the entire poem:

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so (1-2).*

The poet concludes his poem with a stunning paradox stating that death will experience the same destruction:

Death, thou shalt die. (14).

“*Lucy*” is a celebrated poem in which its title and subject are very much interconnected. It reflects the vast imagination of the poet. It embodies elements of Romanticism such as nature and love. It contains many figures of speech such as metaphor and simile, which are more easily understood:

A violet by a mossy stone (5) — the poet used the metaphor to compare Lucy to a violet.
Fair as a star (7) — Lucy is compared to a star, a simile.

Cultural background

The cultural background of “*Death, be not proud*” is unfamiliar and it talks about the philosophy of death. The poet presented death as a powerless figure that has no authority. “Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me”, and “*Death, be not Proud*” (4). The speaker described death as ‘rest of their bones’ and ‘soul’s delivery’. Then he claimed that after death, “death shall be no more”. He believed that death is the beginning of another life beyond that experienced by mortal humans. “According to the description given to death, death is powerful and causes humans to die, but here it is clarified that it is not death, but chance, fate, kings, and hopeless people cause death to occur.” (Abdulla & Lutfi, 2019)

“*Lucy*” is a romantic and personal poem marked by its familiar cultural background and direct feelings. The poem combines natural beauty and love. Its main theme is the tragic death of the innocent and the only child of her parents — Lucy in the storm. The two poems share the same theme — death, but tackled from different perspectives.

Teaching English through Old English poems such as John Donne’s metaphysical poem “*Death, be not proud*” does not suit the students of Hajjah University because of its linguistic and conceptual difficulty, unfamiliar cultural background, use of rhetorical questions and ambiguous interpretations. It may bring about negative results. A Romantic poem such as “*Lucy*”, on the

other hand, is more beneficial to the student due to its simple language and structure, and a more familiar cultural background. The tone of the poem is also thoughtful and the theme is easy. Therefore, “*Lucy*” is more suited to meet their needs, interests, linguistic proficiency and cultural background.

Suggested teaching methodology for poetry

Choosing a good teaching method is also challenging. Using traditional methods such as teacher-centred and literature-oriented approaches in teaching poetry will not help students to improve their language skills. These usually involve the teacher analysing the form and content of the poem, and discerning literary devices and hidden meanings its vocabulary for the student. Therefore, this way offers little to no help to students, and may cause an imbalance and lack in their acquisition of language skills. “In the case of students, whose competency is below the required level, they should find it difficult to cope with such approach of language teaching.” (Yusef, 2017).

To achieve the objectives of teaching in the classroom and make poetry lessons more effective, enjoyable and enabling for students to improve their language skills, teachers have to use different tools and techniques such as the use of cassettes, videos, audio devices or even a translation of the poetry text into the students’ mother tongue. Teachers should also adopt alternative methods such as brainstorming sessions, chain-drills, split the poem, interactive reading, as well as the visual memory development technique (VMDT). According to Kellem (2009), “Before teaching a poem, teachers should first have the students brainstorm to help them express their opinions about the themes/ideas of the poem”. Chain-drill is another method that enables students to develop their speaking skills. “Chain-drill is a very useful method to help learners develop their speaking skills.” (Kundu, 2015). Splitting the poem into smaller parts and words may also provide students with ease in analysing the poem.

CONCLUSION

Poetry is a reliable material to develop the students’ language and literary skills. However, teachers face challenges while teaching English through poetry. These challenges can be viewed in three aspects: the student’s proficiency level, the teacher’s teaching method and the selection of the poetry text. Teachers have to keep pace with changes of the modern age and update their methods, whereas the text should be carefully selected to match students’ needs, interests, linguistic abilities and their cultural background. Teaching older poems including metaphysical ones such as Donne’s “*Death, be not Proud*” would not suit the students of Hajjah University-Yemen because of its linguistic and conceptual difficulty and unfamiliar cultural background. In contrast, a Romantic poem such as “*Lucy*” may prove more beneficial to the students due to its simplistic language and structure, and a more familiar cultural background. Therefore, “*Lucy*” is conclusively more suitable to meet their needs, interests, linguistic proficiency and cultural background.

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Appendix

John Donne's Death be not Proud	William Wordsworth's Lucy
<p>Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so; For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me. From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be, Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow, And soonest our best men with thee do go, Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery. Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell, And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then? One short sleep past, we wake eternally And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Donne 73)</p>	<p>She dwelt among the untrodden ways Beside the springs of Dove, A Maid whom there were none to praise And very few to love: A violet by a mossy stone Half hidden from the eye! Fair as a star, when only one Is shining in the sky. She lived unknown, and few could know When Lucy ceased to be; But she is in her grave, and oh, The difference to me!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(qtd. in Rodway 72)</p>