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The Formeaning Response Approach: Poetry in the EFL Classroom

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where acquisition of English is the ultimate goal, one of the main tasks for the teacher is to provide students with language input and activities that best aid them in their learning process. As different researchers have reported, including poetry-based activities in the EFL classroom is beneficial (Hanauer 2001; Maley and Duff 1989). Among other reasons, poetry is a source of content-rich reading material; a model of creative language in use; a way to introduce vocabulary in context; and a way to focus students' attention on English pronunciation, rhythm, and stress.

Two main pedagogical approaches to teaching poetry and literature have their roots in literary criticism: (1) Stylistics, an approach that analyzes the language forms of the text, and (2) Reader-Response, an approach that concerns itself with the reader's interaction with the text. (For a history of using literature in language classrooms, see Paran 2006.) Although these two approaches are typically considered mutually exclusive, one way to marry the two when teaching poetry is to use what I call the *Formeaning Response* approach. This approach places equal importance on the study of language elements and on responding personally to poetry. This article will first review the Stylistic and Reader-Response approaches and their roles in second language acquisition, and will then demonstrate how to combine them to teach poetry in the EFL classroom with the Formeaning Response approach.

Teaching poetry with the Stylistic approach

According to Short (1996), stylistics is the direct application of linguistic evidence to interpret and analyze literature, and is a general analytical tool that uses explanations of formal aspects of a poem to discuss meaning; for instance, lexical repetition can be used to strengthen the impact of a word, and the number of turns

a certain speaker has in relation to another speaker in a poem indicates his or her relative impact or importance.

Because language is the subject and focus of instruction, stylistic analysis strongly represents the EFL instructional perspective. EFL teaching activities in which students analyze poetry stylistically can provide opportunities to explicate the formal features of English—including the levels of phonology, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse—and relate them to an understanding of the poem. Rosenkjar (2006) gives examples of language-centered activities used for poetry teaching in a university EFL class in Japan, where students do the following:

- highlight complete sentences in a poem with alternating colors
- categorize words from a poem into logical groups
- circle personal pronouns and find a pattern
- underline the main verbs

Buckledee (2002) offers similar activities from a university EFL class in Italy, where students look at a poem and answer questions about verb tenses, possessive adjectives, and singular versus plural forms.

Teaching poetry with the Reader-Response approach

The Reader-Response approach moves the focus of reading from the author and text to the reader. The approach treats the creation of meaning as inseparable from the act of reading. (For more on the Reader-Response approach, see Schultz 2001, 6–10.)

A wide range of research extols the benefits of the Reader-Response approach for second language acquisition. One example is provided by Ali (1993), who incorporated the theory while teaching EFL to engineering students at a university in Malaysia. Ali found that when students personally responded to a short story, they became engaged in independent meaning making, which enhanced their reading experience. Davis (1989) draws exclusively on Iser's (1978) Reader-Response theory and discusses its potential applications to foreign language pedagogy. Davis also calls for the experience of "what happens *during* reading" to be the foundation of meaning (Davis 1989, 424; italics in the original). In what he calls *experiential*

poetry reading, Tomlinson (1998) emphasizes the need to allow language learners to experience reading in a risk-free environment. For example, when classroom tasks are involved, it is best to have students draw pictures or talk about how parts of a story relate to their own lives. Tomlinson stresses that it is important that reading remain an experience, and that students should not be asked questions they might get wrong.

Martin and Laurie (1993), who surveyed participants studying French as a foreign language in Australia about their attitudes toward literature, recommend that teachers permit students to integrate and relate what they are reading to their own personal experiences. Liaw (2001) studied the effects of Reader-Response theory in an EFL course taught in a Taiwanese university. The students wrote personal responses to short stories, and they were most interested in the texts when they could personally relate and respond to the characters and themes of the stories. The students felt that taking their individual responses into account clarified the relevance of literature to their language learning goals.

There is also evidence that *not* including students' personal backgrounds with the study of literature has a negative effect on language learning. In a survey of EFL students and teachers in private high schools in Istanbul, Akyel and Yalçin (1990) found that the students did not see literature as a way to reach language learning goals because they were often not called upon to respond personally to literature, nor were the language-based activities in the classroom communicatively useful. Likewise, Davis et al. (1992) found that although students in EFL contexts have favorable attitudes toward literature, language learning goals are not realized when the teaching style does not allow for personal responses that would make the literature relevant to learners.

Transactional theory

It is also important to mention Transactional theory, which is linked to the Reader-Response approach and clearly explains the reciprocal reaction that occurs between the reader and the text. According to Fish (1980), it is more accurate to consider what literature *does* as the reader encounters a literary text

than to try to describe what the text means, because the meaning is an *event* that is generated through the participation between the reader and the text. According to Rosenblatt (1978), reading is also an event that involves a nonlinear transaction between the text and the reader; meaning is not created by a preconceived interpretation of the text but by the unique individual, whose emotions, background, and ideas create meaning during a particular time and setting. Rosenblatt (1978) places reading transactions on a scale from the *efferent stance*, or reading to get information, to the *aesthetic stance*, or reading for the experience or for pleasure. Tutas (2006), who conducted an empirical study about the effects on EFL learners exposed to Rosenblatt's (1978) scales, found that responding aesthetically to literature facilitates students' enjoyment and engagement with literature. Hirvela (1996) also explores the way that Rosenblatt's transactional approach is applied in the EFL classroom. He argues that the meaning that is created during reading is produced through a transaction between the learner and the text, which is key to the successful teaching of literature.

The tension between Stylistic and Reader-Response approaches

It has often been argued that reading a poem is different from analyzing its linguistic parts. Gower (1986) states that stylisticians are concerned only with analyzing the language of a poem, and he recommends the inclusion of personal responses in which students talk about whether they liked the poem or thought it was any good, a practice that is likely "anathema" to academics involved in stylistics (129). This observation is indicative of the sharp divide between the Stylistic and Reader-Response approaches in the context of EFL instruction.

The process that learners go through in understanding and discussing a poem was empirically researched by Hanauer (2001), who reported that learners constructed meaning "95.94 per cent" of the time by focusing on and discussing the linguistic elements of a poem (316). His research about the primacy of language analysis to construct meaning did not go unchallenged. Mattix (2002) argues that the learners' 95.94 percent construc-

tion of meaning through focusing on formal aspects is due to a procedural error that did not allow for the participants' aesthetic reading of the poem. And in Hall's (2003) response to Hanauer, he argues that pleasure and understanding, not understanding alone, are equally important in reading poetry. It is the task of the teacher, he writes, to "motivate, to contextualize and to individualize often anxious and insecure readers' experiences of texts to promote pleasure and understanding" (Hall 2003, 398; italics in the original).

While some researchers feel that an analysis of language forms and style is paramount to the study of poetry in the EFL context, other researchers claim that it is the personal relationship with poetic themes that positively affects learning English. This dichotomy does not need to exist, and I am proposing to combine both approaches into one.

The Formeaning Response approach to teaching poetry in a language classroom

I have coined the term *formeaning* (form + meaning) to represent Stylistics, the language-centered approach to teaching poetry. Form and meaning are inseparable in a stylistic analysis, because to correctly describe and understand a language form—such as a lexical item or grammatical structure—one must consider the form in a meaningful context. Therefore, form and meaning are not two separate aspects to consider when analyzing poetry—they must be considered one and the same. EFL teachers know that learners must focus on language itself in any type of reading, and especially poetry, which often has uncommon usage issues and utilizes rhyming, metaphor, and even format to create meaning. EFL students are primed to attend to linguistic features because they aim to learn a foreign language, and successful lessons and activities must be relevant to this linguistic goal. When classroom activities include stylistic analysis, the language itself takes center stage, and discussions of meaning must derive from and coincide with discussions of linguistic features.

The Formeaning Response approach's *response* component, which comes from Reader-Response theory, is based on recognizing that when students personally relate to literary themes, the subject matter becomes more

relevant—and that this relevance, in turn, assists the learning process. When students relate their own experiences and beliefs to make sense of a poem and its language, there is often less direct focus on the linguistic forms. This is because students construct an overall meaning through a transactional process largely based on their own backgrounds, memories, and ideas.

The combination of the Stylistics and Reader-Response approaches makes poetry learning motivational and personally relevant to students. The Formeaning Response approach is designed to bridge the gap between aesthetic and stylistic reading approaches, and to show how pleasure and understanding can coincide and feed off of each other. Following are examples of activities that teachers can use to teach poetry by using the Formeaning Response approach.

Classroom activities and the Formeaning Response approach

Teaching poetry or literature is similar to implementing any EFL activity in that teachers must consider the language level of the students so that the material selected is not too difficult. It is also important to stress that all students can and should freely express themselves when discussing poetry. This freedom of expression ensures a collaborative, learner-centered classroom that takes into account the EFL students' individual differences, learning goals, and affective factors.

A good way to ease students into a poetry lesson is to give them a general feeling for the ideas presented in the poem by providing a warm-up activity. Students should first brainstorm and express their opinions about the themes of the poem. Initially, they may not feel confident that they can simultaneously express their opinions and refer to the linguistic aspects of a poem, so teachers might want to choose warm-up activities that do not necessarily refer to the language in the poem, but to a theme or image. For example, teachers can show a picture of an item or character and let students answer questions about the picture, or have students interview each other about personal experiences related to the themes of the poem. In this way, students activate the background knowledge that will help them analyze and understand the poem.

Form and meaning activities

After the warm-up activities, students are ready to look at the poem. But instead of reading the poem in its entirety, they can participate in activities like the following and focus on the form and meaning of the poem's essential linguistic elements.

- *Alternative words exercise.* In this multiple-choice exercise, individual words throughout a poem are put in parentheses. Then, two or three alternative words are added to each original one as choices, and students as a whole class or in groups choose which word they think is most suitable (see Maley and Duff 1989, 39). This activity gives students a chance to look at individual words in the context of the surrounding lines, and to think about fine distinctions in meaning and how vocabulary items work together in the poem.
- *Listening cloze.* Certain words are blanked out in a poem, and as the teacher reads the poem out loud, the students fill in the blanks with the missing words. This exercise offers students another way to focus their attention on individual words in context.
- *Listing.* Students make a list of words in a poem; this could be a list of pronouns or verbs or concrete objects. Students then manipulate the list by ranking the words in order of importance or grouping them together into categories based on their characteristics or definitions.

The above exercises focus attention on individual linguistic items and push students to make choices based on a limited context rather than on the entire poem. This is a necessary first step in helping students realize how they can point to actual language and form in the poem when expressing their own ideas as readers.

Response activities

As students read the poem in its entirety, the following activities help them discover and express what the poem means to them as individuals.

- *Discussion questions.* In pairs, small groups, or as a whole class, students discuss how they would feel if they were a character in the poem, or speculate

about what a character in a poem will do next and why.

- *Draw pictures.* Students draw pictures depicting scenes or characters in a poem. This activity lets them move from linguistic to pictorial representation of a poem; doing so requires an understanding of the poem's language and themes.
- *Role play.* Adopting the role of characters in the poem forces students to think about and act out their feelings and ideas in relation to the themes of the poem.
- *Letter writing.* Follow-up activities are an effective way for students to respond to poetry. For example, students can write a letter to a character in the poem, giving that character advice or offering sympathy, or write a diary entry while imagining that they are the character in the poem. By writing to a character, or as a character, students must place themselves in the situation of the poem.

Formeaning Response activities

When feasible, it is desirable to combine the two types of activities mentioned above. Teachers can adjust lessons and activities to provide scaffolding where needed, based upon whether students need assistance with the language in the poem or are ready to apply personal experiences and ideas.

- *Discussion of the alternative words exercise.* Teachers can easily adapt this activity to different classrooms and students. Each student explains to a partner why he or she chose certain words in the previously mentioned alternative words exercise. Students' reasons can range from phonological ("I like the way it sounds") to discourse ("That's what he's supposed to say") explanations. Although the students are responding to the language of the poem, this activity deepens their understanding of the main themes and ideas, and it helps them relate the poem to their lives.
- *True/False exercise.* A True/False exercise can be formeaning-focused, response-focused, or both, depending on the type of written statements. The teacher develops statements that either relate to the language of the poem or are associated with its main theme. Students mark the statements as True or False, then discuss the reasons for their choices. This exercise is more formeaning-focused if the students have to make choices based on linguistic evidence (such True/False statements might be "The poem is written in the present tense" or "The narrator of the poem is angry about the situation"), and is more response-focused if students have to personally relate to the ideas in the poem (e.g., "The poem makes me feel happy" or "If I were the narrator of the poem, I would react in the same way").

Conclusion

The Stylistic and Reader-Response approaches are both useful for teaching poetry in the EFL classroom. However, instead of strictly following one of the approaches, the teacher can develop activities that help students work with the language *and* engage with and personally respond to the material. By designing activities that allow students to focus on linguistic aspects of a poem as well as personally relate to ideas represented in poetry, teachers can motivate students to attend and respond to both the form and the overall meaning. Combining both approaches in the same lesson, and in the same exercise when possible, anchors students in the language of a poem while inviting them to express their own responses to the themes of the poem.

Some EFL teachers may approach the idea of using poetry in their classrooms with trepidation. That is understandable. Two researchers who express reservations about using literature in the language classroom are Edmondson (1997) and Horowitz (1990). Horowitz's argument is that the language used in literature may not be richer than language used in some nonfiction genres (164), while Edmondson asserts that literature is not an essential piece of the language learning puzzle.

My stance, however, is that poetry can be a useful type of input for EFL learners who, by definition, need to understand linguistic aspects to reach meaning, and it also deepens their acquisition of English by giving them the opportunity to describe and interpret

their experiences and to express their opinions in an interesting, meaningful context. By studying poetry with the Formeaning Response approach, students are attending to the language of a poem, using that linguistic evidence to discuss the poem, and relating the themes to their own ideas and lives.

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