Teaching Poetry in an EFL/ESL Class: 
An Integrative and Communicative Approach

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Abstract

The range of English learning materials currently available to students of EFL/ESL has been extended and varied. They are ranged from magazines, essays, newspaper articles, journal writings, short stories, plays and novels. However, very few have considered poetry as proper material for learning English language. One of the factors for this marginalization of poetry as suitable material in the EFL/ESL classroom is that many believe that English poetry is still characterized as deviating from or distorting the norms of Standard English language and it is very difficult. The purpose of this paper is to show how English poems, if selected prudently, can be turned into effective ESL/EFL materials that can be used to improve students' level of the English language. The paper will try to show how an integrative and communicative approach is an effective strategy for teaching poetry in an EFL/ESL classroom. Robert Frost's poem 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is used as a model.

Keywords : Communicative approach, illustrations, pre-reading, while reading, post reading,
I. Introduction

Many consider poetry as one of the most sophisticated forms of literary expression and hence a difficult medium for language learners. While some believe that poetry helps in the process of language acquisition, others suspect that poetic concepts and cultural assumptions are usually too difficult for EFL learners to grasp.

However, a broader perspective on the use of poetry in the language classroom can lead to a meaningful and fruitful language learning experience. This paper tries to describe how poems can effectively be used in English language classes to reinforce students' knowledge of the English language vocabulary, grammar etc. The paper advocates an interactive and collaborative approach to teaching a poem which will have the required result.

1.1 Advantages of using poetry to Language Teaching

One of the prerequisites for language learning is a rich experience of language in use which is available in Poetry. Teaching a poem in an EFL class will also promote cooperation and communication as well as individual expression in the EFL classroom. The benefits of using poetry in language classes have been highlighted by many ESL/EFL practitioners. Their arguments are:

1. Poetry can be used as a valuable resource to introduce and practice language by exposing students to "authentic models-real language in context" (Brumfit & Carter, 1987). According to Tomlinson (1989) using poetry contributes far more to the development of language skills in real contexts than "a total concentration on the presentation and the practice of language items" (p.42).

2. Poems provide students with an opportunity to enrich their vocabulary in a new way by offering meaningful context, in which they could be used and hence be remembered more effectively (Lazar, 1996; Norstrom, 2000)

3. Poems encourage students in developing their creativity while providing a break from regular classroom routines (McKay, 1982). As students study the poems, they can simultaneously discover interesting ideas for creative writing. According to Collie and Slater (1987) "using poetry in the language classroom can lead naturally on to freer and creative written expression" (p.72).

4. Poetry based activities are motivating as they generate strong emotional reactions. As Hess (2003) notes, "Entering a literary text, under the guidance of appropriate teaching, brings about the kind of participation almost no other text can produce. When we read, understand, and interpret a poem we learn language through the expansion of our experience with a larger human reality" (p.20)

5. According to Lazar (1996), poems also provide students with insight into developing cross-cultural awareness and this in turn will help them in acquiring fluency in the target language (p.75).

6. McKay (1982) points out that poems provide inspiration and can serve as a good model for creative writing (p. 63).

7. Heath (1996) opines that 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 (p.54).
1.2. Choosing an Appropriate Poem

One of the challenges teachers face is regarding the selection of a suitable poem for the students. The types of poems that can be used are plenty. However, 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 the classroom teaching. First of all, the teacher should enjoy the poem that he/she chooses. It is also important to select a poem of an appropriate length. Texts need to be appropriate to the level of the students' comprehension. Shorter poems may be easier to use within the class time available, but longer ones like Robert Frost's "The Death of a Hired Man" provide a story, more contextual details, and development of character and plot and hence will be interesting for the learners. It is better to choose contemporary poems in which the syntax is more likely to be similar to that found in language textbooks that students may be familiar with.

1.3. Integrated and Communicative approach to teaching Poetry

One of the important strategies a teacher can adopt in the class is an integrated approach where the students are involved full well. In this method, language skills will not be taught in isolation but in an integrated way, incorporating a set of text- based, student centered activities which as Collie & Slater (1987) suggest "add fresh momentum into the teaching of literature by stimulating students' desire to read and encouraging their responses" (p.8). Teaching a poem should involve pre-reading tasks, interactive work on the text and follow up activities. Activities like predicting, gap filling, creative writing, role-playing, integrating spelling with vocabulary etc can establish the necessary connection between language and the literature which eventually make the teaching and learning of the poem a very productive and enjoyable enterprise. These activities not only create a challenging environment where the students try to put their mettle in the best way possible, but also call for a great deal of attention on the part of the teacher who becomes a facilitator and as Dutta (2001) points out the teacher at this stage can have both the "intuitive response of a practicing literary critic and the analytical tools of a practical linguist" (p.522). According to Roman Jakobson (1960) “A linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and not conversant with linguistic methods, are equally flagrant anachronism” (p.377). This statement implies that language, the medium through which a writer brings out his/her creative output claims a closer attention than most teachers of literature are willing to devote.

In an integrated approach, a teacher ceases to teach and instead he becomes a participant and guide who work with his/her students. Here, the classroom activities may be divided into three categories viz. "Pre-Reading Activities", "While- Reading Activities" and "Post- Reading Activities". Pre-reading activities are kind of warming up which can provide a forum to elicit from students their feelings and responses to ideas and issues in a prescribed text. "While- reading activities" aim at helping the students to experience the text holistically by developing a fruitful interaction between the text and the reader. Post-reading activities encourage students to reflect upon what they have read and they generate thoughtful discussion on different issues related to both language and literature arising from the text.

In what follows, I shall try to enumerate some integrated and communicative approaches for teaching a poem in an undergraduate class. The selected poem is Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" (Appendix 1).
(A) Pre-Reading Activities

Before students read the poem, it is useful to involve them into activities that will create the right attitude for receptivity and enjoyment with the result that they are inspired to read the poem again and again. The activities involve the students who will be asked to make use of their experience of life and their imagination and intelligence which will enable them to guess what may happen in certain situations. The title of the poem, illustrations, keywords, warmers, language exercises are some of the tools that may be used in the classroom for generating inferences.

(i) Title

The title of a piece of literary work is important, as it tends to indicate the subject/theme of the text. The teacher announces in the class the title of the poem that s/he wants to discuss and without giving the poem ask the students to infer what is likely to happen in the text. After writing the title "Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening" on the board, the teacher may ask a range of questions to elicit responses from the students:

1. Is the title of the poem a sentence or a group of words?
2. What do you understand by woods?
3. What is the difference between "wood” and "woods"?
4. Give some examples of nouns that give you one meaning in the singular form and another meaning in the plural form?
5. Do you have woods in your country? Name them
6. Can you predict from the title what is likely to happen in the poem?
7. Is the poem going to be a description of the woods?
8. Is the poem going to describe an incident that took place in the woods?

At this juncture, students can be asked to work in groups, pairs or individually. The teacher may collect the answers and share with the students the different responses that they have given.

(ii) Illustration:

Having discussed the title, the teacher may now give a pictorial presentation of the poem. Such an activity can provide important clues for predicting the content of the poem. There are many texts that have front-cover illustrations including pictorial representations of the contents. Alternatively, the teacher (if s/he has artistic talent) can draw a picture based on the poem or take the help of an artist friend. An illustration of the poem, "Stopping By Woods..." should show a forest with a lake where the water is frozen as it is winter time. Near the lake there is a traveler who has stopped his horse and he is watching the beautiful scene. The horse has harness bells around its neck. The teacher asks the students to derive as much information as possible about the background/setting of the poem by closely examining the details. While students go through the illustration, the teacher may ask some questions like:

What could be the time in the forest- evening/night/afternoon/dawn?
Why do you think the traveler has stopped his horse in the forest?
Do you know what a “farmhouse” is?
Is the traveler afraid?
What must he be thinking?
What do you think about the lake? Why is it frozen?
Is it a beautiful or frightening site? Explain

These questions, prompting further involvement and responses, bring students one step closer to the text and encourage them to read and understand the poem better.

(iii) Warmers

One line warmers can be picked up from the poem or chosen from maxims, proverbs and quotations that are closely related to some aspects of the theme or content. Warmers facilitate open discussion and help elicit inferences about the content of the poem. The teacher, choosing some related warmers, distribute them to students and asks them to explain the idea contained in them. In order to elicit more interest in understanding the poem the teacher may choose the following one-liners:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep
Man's heart away from nature becomes hard
A thing of beauty is a joy for ever
There is pleasure in the pathless woods
For every promise there is a price to pay
Miles to go before I sleep
The fear of death follows from the fear of life
A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time

Students may discuss the above in group, or in pairs and the teacher can ask them to write briefly about what they have understood from the warmers. The warmers help the students to formulate ideas on a more concentrated level about the possible meaning of the poem.

(iv) Keywords and expressions

The text sometimes gives clues for predicting its theme or motif through the vocabulary used. It is, therefore, useful to pay attention to the structure, organization, selection and collocation of lexical items in a literary piece. They usually appear in the form of key words/expressions sentences or lines and the students will be able to judge what the atmosphere within the text is going to be. In this case, the teacher can present a list of lexical items from the poem and may ask the students to prepare a mental picture of what they have imagined/understood from the connotative implications of the given words and expressions.

Watch …woods…fill up with snow
Frozen lake
Harness bells
Of easy wind and downy flakes
Miles to go before I sleep
The teacher can prompt some questions which may be of help for the students to come to certain conclusions:

Why is the narrator watching the woods?
Are the woods filled up with snow? What is the reason?
What do the "woods" represent? Something good or bad?
What do you understand by the expression "frozen lake"? Why is the lake frozen?
The wind is described as "easy" and flakes are "downy"- Why?
What do you think the poem is about? Does it convey a message?

The activities discussed so far are meant to elicit inferences from the students regarding the poem that they are going to learn. These activities will create a lot of interest and curiosity in the mind of the students and inspire them to read the poem closely. At this juncture, the teacher can ask the students to open the text and engage them in the following While-reading activities

(B) While-reading Activities

After doing the pre-reading activities, students are ready to read and study the text that they are supposed to deal with. Here, they are going to develop a purposeful interaction between the text and its readers. The following While-reading activities can be tried out in the class:

Listening to a good reading of the text
Reading of the text
Language Exercises
Checking against the inferences made about the text in the pre-reading activities

Students often enjoy listening to a text either on a tape or when it is being read out loudly by the teacher in the classroom. It is, of course, very advantageous if the teacher has a good voice quality and a dramatic sense while reading the text. This will help students to "feel" the language, its rhythm, intonation, sounds etc. If the text is long, the teacher can read some of the interesting sections which will encourage them to read the whole.

Now, it is the turn of the students to read first, silently and then loudly individually, in pair or in group. The teacher can then ask them to mark some of the difficult words or expressions in the text and help them to find out the meanings.

From the reading, students will be happy to note that they have formed some clear ideas about the poem before actually going through it.

(C) Post-reading Activities
Post-reading activities are meant to create a suitable situation for the students to express their reactions to reading the text. These will not only deepen their understanding of the text but also generate interest in the creative use of the language. Some of the post-reading activities are:

(i) Comprehension Questions
These questions are meant to assess how far the students have understood the text. The teacher may ask the following questions regarding the poem:
What are "harness bells"?
Why does the horse shake his harness bells?
What other sounds alone can be heard in the woods?
Why does the poet mention these sounds?
"My little horse must think it queer" What does "it" mean here?
Can the horse think like a human being? Why does the poet give this quality to an animal?

Students may be asked to answer the questions orally or in writing and the teacher can go through the answers and if necessary improve upon them.

Other subsidiary questions may also be asked to know whether the students have understood the poem wholly:

Who is the narrator of the poem? Is it the poet?
What do you understand by "poetic persona"?
Explain what a lyric poem is?
Is the poet speaking to another person or himself?
Do you know what soliloquy/monologue is?
Why does the poet use the present tense all through the poem?
Why has the poet repeated the last two lines?
Explain some of the figures of speech in the poem?

(ii) Language Exercises

A variety of language exercises can be introduced in the class at this juncture. These exercises may be either element-based, focusing on particular areas of language or skill based, focusing on any four skills of language learning. Some of the language exercises that may be carried out with regard to the present poem are:

Giving antonyms of the selected words and phrases and change certain lines into passive voice (example: "He will not see me stopping here")
Change the use of present tense of the poem into past tense a different version of the poem.
Studying structural peculiarities of the poem (Example: Inverted structure "Whose woods these are I think I know". Ask the students to put the line in the usual prose order. Or repetition of the line "And miles to go before I sleep")

(iii) Memorizing

Memorization is a useful pedagogical tool especially regarding poetry. It is not as some say a "rote exercise". On the contrary, memorization allows the students to 'feel' and experience language. It is a profound source of 'spiritual nourishment'. If the poem is very lengthy, some interesting lines or stanzas could be memorized and it is a very fruitful and rewarding experience.

(iv) Creative Activities

Re- writing exercises and role playing are two creative activities that the teacher can introduce in order to
enhance the students' understanding and appreciation of the poem for the improvement of their expressive and receptive skills.

Re-writing activities may be 'free' or 'controlled'. In the former, students enjoy the freedom of expressing, in their own words, what they have understood from the text. They may be asked to summarize the poem in a fixed number of words, or to rewrite the text with a different ending.

Students should also be encouraged to write a parallel poem using the same theme in a different background, may be a local one, reflecting the type of identity they long for. They are supposed to use the grammar structures in the original poem and adapt all the elements to writing about their own identity, thus creating a new poem. [One EFL student of my University has written a parallel poem after studying the original poem. She has used the local color and describes the beauty of Oman's barren mountains] (Appendix 2).

(v) Role Playing

In role playing, students are asked to assume different roles. It enables the students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written word without focusing on the mechanics of language. They are able to develop a sense of awareness of self in the mainstream culture through creating drama in poetry with the result that language is more easily internalized, and hence language is remembered. Here, the students use English for specific communication purpose. They get an opportunity to experiment with non-verbal communicative aspects of language (body language, gestures, and facial expressions) along with intonation, rhythm, stress, slang, and idiomatic expressions. Some poems such as Frost's The Death of a Hired Man” are like short plays, often written in dialogue form, and are suitable for dramatization and they have strong emotional theme. As Tomlinson (1986) points out, “Poems which express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions, or ideas are usually more 'productive' than those which are gentle, descriptive, or neutral” (p. 36).

Such activities help students gain self confidence and self esteem. In the case of the poem under study, one student can play the role of the poetic persona, who is the narrator of the poem and the other the traveler on horseback. There are numerous poems that the students can perform with the guidance and encouragement from the teacher. Frost's other poems like “Mending Wall" "The Road Not Taken", John Wakeman's “Love in Brooklyn”, Carl Sandburg's “Why Did the Children Put Beans in Their Ears?”, Grace Taber Hallock's “Woodpecker in Disguise” are just few other examples that can easily be dramatized in the classroom.

1.4 Conclusion

There are umpteen strategies and methods for teaching a poem in a language class room. The strategies described in this paper are just a few. They can be applied in the case of teaching any other genres in literature- a short story, a novel or drama. Whatever strategies a teacher adopts in the class, the aim is that students gain a fuller understanding of the text and have linguistically and conceptually prepare themselves to study it for interpretation and evaluation. Using the strategies discussed above, students learn how to make predictions and check them against the details in the given text. They also learn how to derive meaning of a text and form a semantic chain from the key words, examine how language is used to describe a setting and create desired effects, analyze how to assess them, and also find out ways of
transferring the text and reconstructing its specific and literal meaning. Thus, with awakened language sensitivity and improved literary insight, they gain the ability to read a poem critically as a creative expression with aesthetic sensibility.

References


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Appendix 1

Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening
Robert Frost
Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
Appendix 2- Student's poem

Stopping By Mountains on a Winter Evening - A Parody
Whose mountains these are? I think I know
They are the marvelous creation of Allah, the Almighty
He will see me stopping my “sayara” on the lonely way
Watching the majesty of the mountains.
My friends will think it queer.

They will say, “it's time for chatting”
No one will see me stopping here
The most beautiful evening of the year
Everything calm, salubrious and serene
The only other sound is the musical note of birds
Though barren, an ineffable beauty spreads over
The setting sun says “masalama” to the mountains.

The mountains are lovely, deep, dark and unfathomable
But I have a lot to read and write
Promises to keep
Miles to go before I reach
Miles to go before I reach

An EFL Student