

“Poetry Is Language at Its Most Distilled and Powerful”: Bringing Poetry in Language Classes Can Make Language Understanding and Communication Skills Better

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Abstract All of us have been brought up by learning and enjoying nursery rhymes which make our understanding of target language more accurate and fluent. Then why these poems have not been a part of curriculum when we learn second or target language. This question always makes me crazy. The present paper is about the use of poetry and its pros and cons when we talk about second language learners. Poetry, to all of us is a soothing balm to give comfort to us in every situation. So, I feel that use of poems can give language learners a new direction and will enlighten their path of success. Poems are often rich in cultural references, and they present a wide range of learning opportunities to teach English. We can use poetry for Communicative speaking activities, working on pronunciation, Writing activities and other classroom activities. Poetry promotes literacy, builds community, and fosters emotional resilience. It can cross boundaries that little else can. Students find a poem a welcome, and sometimes inspirational, change from a traditional text book. Poems can be involving, motivating and memorable, and they can supplement and enrich just about any lesson. The present paper is an attempt to bring poetry into mainstream of language learning and make it more attractive.

Keywords Innovative, Literature, Curriculum, Technology, Strategies

1. Introduction

With the spread and development of English around the World, English has become as the second language not only of India, but many other countries, other than countries whose first language is English. English is Lingua Franca and enjoying a high prestigious place across the globe. At present, the growth of technology, travel, communication and business across the globe is possible just because of advent and development of English. As the number English learners are increasing day by day, many innovative practices are carried out for the growth and accurate

understanding of the language. With the use of technology in ELT, we have inserted Movies, Drama and other media devices for learning innovative practices. But if we throw a cursory glance at the curriculum, methods and medium of instructions we use to teach, we find that poetry is neglected in the area. We have relied on other teaching processes but omitted poetry from our language curriculum.[1] The purpose of this paper is to draw attention towards ‘Poetry’, the most original, authentic, powerful and pure mode of writing into main stream of language learning and teaching. We have a beautiful quote by Hannah Arendt, “Poetry, whose material is language, is perhaps the most human and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it”.

When people say that Poetry is a sheer Luxury or an option without which language can also survive and it’s useless to add it in curriculum as it’s only imaginative and cannot connect us with reality. We must not encourage them. Let me clearly say that we need poetry, we really can do a lot with the use of poetry in language classrooms. It promotes literacy, enhance emotions and build communication among peer group. It crosses the boundaries of any particular state or country and connects people from heart to heart. While learning any language we can break it up in two simple break ups: First stage, where we learn basics and simple language, which make our understanding and communication at starting level. But there is a second stage of language too, where we need slightly tough words, construction and also powerful words to express feelings of emotional aspects of life. And to clear the situation, I must say, that these emotional aspects of life can only be learned by poetry. So, many a time’s scholars and language teachers tried to enter poetry in language teaching too[2]. Nile Stanlay, an Educationist and Reading specialist says very aptly in this connection,

“Poetry helps students do well on high stakes tests because it gives their minds an exhilarating workout. Poetry inspires students to read more, imagine more, think more, discuss more and write more.”

In fusing poetry into curriculum of language learning does not require a long and detailed strategy.[13] We can infuse very effective and interesting plans for adding poetry into our language learning process.

2. Researches in the Related Field

Researches show that Poetry cannot be the intellectual dimension but also be a sensuous dimension, an emotional dimension and imaginative dimension. Abrams (2001, p. 103) argues that there is difference between the literary language and the ordinary language, he also suggests that central function of ordinary language is to communicate to auditors a message, or information, by references to the world existing outside of language.[12] Again it is observed that teachers may feel that the knowledge of correct language is not yet sufficiently well established in students and teachers worry that exposing students to more creative uses of language could legitimize the use of deviant language in the classroom. Reeves (1963) argue that “in the teaching of poetry basically there are four factors to be considered. The students; the poems to be taught; the methods adopted and the personality of the teacher.[20] British council admin observed that using poetry in the classroom is that can usually create lots of opportunities for personalization. This means that the students have plenty to say, and the communication is genuine because they are talking about their own experiences or hypotheses. They are engaged and motivated, which helps to make the lesson and the language (and sometimes even the poem) memorable. This helped him a lot as a teacher as it can rub off on the most sceptical of students, and without it the lesson is doomed. His students who have always asked for more grammar, but now they're asking for more poems too, something they didn't even know they wanted! And it's a reward for a teacher. According to Collie and Slater (1990:3), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom.[5] These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Duff and Maley (1990) suggest that the main reasons for integrating literary texts particularly poetry in the language classroom are linguistic, methodological and motivational.[7] According to Nile Stanley, a reading specialist, researcher, and a professor of education and a performance poet too, “Poetry helps students do well on high stakes tests because it gives their minds an exhilarating workout. Poetry inspires students to read more, imagine more, think more, discuss more and write more.” All of which will, of course, will help them on tests. His research shows importance of poetry in language and linguistics.[13]

Hanauer (2001) has explored the role of the process of reading and analyzing poetry in SLL among advanced L2 learners with the emphasis on the process of how non-native speakers understand poetic texts and how this understanding interacts with their SLA. Hanauer(2001) has pointed out that poetry reading can create cultural awareness while language learners are noticing the gap between poem content and their

own world knowledge of target culture. Lazar(2002) has also emphasized the importance of focusing on polysemous words in poetic texts. Not only this, the process of writing poetry can also give SLL the rare chance to express themselves in L2 in a unique way.[12]

3. Why Teach Poetry in Language Classes

I teach language and literature both to undergraduate students who are non-native English speakers. English in my country is used, read, taught as second language. My students are from urban and semi urban background. Those who did their schooling from convent or public schools, with mode of Instruction English, they are fluent in English. They need only pruning, vocabulary enhancement and clarity of Grammar and thought. But to non-native speakers whose mode of Instruction at school level is Hindi (Mother Tongue), we really have to be on our heels to make them correct and bring them to a level where they can speak, read and write flawlessly. Three years back, we have a change in syllabus and poetry has been completely abolished even from BA III English Literature class, which bring a sadistic approach among students. This episode gives me a message that students really enjoy Poetry. To them, even if they are reading literature, Poetry is integral part. That make an idea in my mind and I surveyed my language class by giving them some tasks and assignment related poetry, even if they are not the part of curriculum. That gives me some good reason to think about this paper. This research shows some underlying reasons why poetry should be a part of language learning:

1. It helps to build a group or community of students of likewise interest which help them to interact freely without any hesitation, is the base of language learning. We all know that students hesitate in speaking as they are not sure of accuracy and fluency.
2. Poetry has sounds, rhyme and rhythm. So, when students read it aloud, the fluency and flow they get, give them extra self-confidence which is again a key to success.
3. Remember, as soon as a kid start speaking we teach him/her nursery rhymes. It makes fluency. So, naturally poetry is a good reason to learn a language.
4. Poetry opens new vistas for speaking, listening reading aloud. It gives us ears to listen and all this give motivation.
5. As poetry is not bound in rules of Grammar it only need good words which we can abide and express through proper construction, we make students learn good English rhythmically.
6. Yeats has said about poetry, “It is blood, imagination, and intellect running together”. I think it give a good reason for adding poetry in language class. It says that poetry bring curriculum, social and family training and student's own creativity together. So, it is really important.

Actually there are two stages of language learning; Literal and Figurative. Poetry is difficult to define, but there's one characteristic that most poems share - figurative language. Literal language is the use of words in the conventional manner, when words and phrases are used to convey their typical meaning. Figurative language, on the other hand, is the use of words to intentionally move away from their standard meaning. Since poetry's life blood is figurative language because it offers comparisons, expressions, and figurative language exaggerates or understates a writer's idea[5]. To learn a language does not mean little learning, instead we have to master our students in target language. So, it must to learn literal and figurative variant both.

4. Some Useful Strategies for Introducing Poetry in ELT

There was a time when poetry is read, write and appreciated by literature learners, scholars and admirers only. Dr. Stanley opines that poetry also massages the heart, cares for soul, and prepares students on life's tougher questions. He further suggests us, "Poetry must be embedded within a systematic, well-organised, and total-literacy program that's informed by broadly researched principles and best practices[13]. It is considered as a highly, esteemed and scholarly mode of literature. But in recent years, advent of digital age, technology has made bondage between language and literature. So, second language acquisition and grammatical structures can also be easily taught and understood with the help of Poetry. Wilmort in 1973 has clearly mentioned the relationship between literature and language. The students can learn a lot with the help of a poem. A poem is made of five elements[19]. And if a student understands those 5 elements, he can understand a language well.

- Poetry gives ample opportunities to students to participate in classroom activities. They can be paired, group or individual. But as poetry is imaginary, the students feel comfortable to interact with teacher as well as fellow students.
- Poetry can be explained by many ways such as using Media, ICT and even live performance by teacher, fellows students, pictorial cards which at once inscribe on students mind.
- Oral presentation in different ways such as reading aloud, singing, reciting and reading in different tones and voices can give a great effect.
- Poetry is imaginary; it makes and creates many questions which again are a good exercise for language learning. Students ask and give answers in target language which is the real success of a language teacher.

- A poem has many parts and rhymes, rhythm and pitch. When they practice reading it, they learn how to express feelings through words. This makes their vocabulary full of emotions and brings a touch of humanity and reality in their language.
- Vocabulary in poetry is naturally higher than any other mode of writing. We can find as many synonyms for a word in a single poem, which is again a good strategy to learn language.

5. Poems Can Develop Productive Skills

Poetry is a great motivator when we try to learn it. It is rich in tradition, culture and language and gives a great opportunity to learn language[11]. The main exercises which we can do with the help of poetry are:-

A. Speaking Activities to Enhance Communication

- It's a pre reading activity in which we can promote students by asking question to share their knowledge about poetry in particular.
- We can pair them; make groups according to the strength of class for this discussion.
- Teachers can ask students to sing, read or speak poems in rhythm.
- Students can be given exercises to speak 5 lines about contents, ending or theme and central idea of the poem.

B. Checking Their Speaking Skill and Pronunciation

- Give students a task of speaking or reciting a poem, teachers can check their pronunciation and speaking skill.
- Recitation of the poem can give feelings to their words. As a result they can show their feelings in their conversation.

C. Writing Skills and Students Activities

- A poem can give many opportunities of understanding and practicing target language. Teachers can give some writing tasks too.
- Students can be given to write about the central idea, theme or situation of the poetry.
- They can be asked to write summary the poem.

All this will increase their confidence of writing. They can search Homonym, Homophones, Synonym, and Antonyms and suggest other words which will increase their vocabulary. The best aspect of introducing poetry in language class room is that it gives many opportunities for practice and enhancement of language[12]. Actually student's mind-set is like this, that they feel bored by plain and languid teaching. So, Poetry gives rhythm to their monotonous language classroom teaching.

6. Poetic Activities Which Can Be Introduced

The language class is always an interactive and activity based class, where students and teacher work together. If a teacher give lectures and do chalk and duster teaching, the outcome of the class will be really depressing. So, ELT always has to try innovative and unique activities to make students well versed in second language or target language[10]. Poetry and its use can also make classroom study not only more potential, but will make fruitful results. If Teachers are unable to add poetry in syllabus or curriculum, they can use it as exercise to make their teaching effective. They can:

- Introduce a topic and ask students to compose and speak 4 lines in poem in the given topic. To introduce it among students, what Teacher can do, they can read a poem aloud on the topic first to motivate their students. I remember my experience as a trainee and member of summer school seminar 2014. Oxford University, where one of our Tutor Adrian Underhill, start his lecture with a beautiful poem in the beginning of the class.
- What Teachers can do, that they can give a long poem divided in different stanzas to their students and ask various exercises such as vocabulary exercises, rhyming words, synonyms etc.
- They can be given poems, rhymes to learn and read or recite aloud to make pronunciation and speaking practice.
- Teachers can use technology for the betterment of pronunciation and fluency. What they can use is recording facility in language labs. They can record student's voice while they are uttering given poems and when they will repeat it in front of them, students can understand their defects.

7. Poetry and Role of ELT

The role of English Teacher is very important when he is going to introduce poetry in language class. The first thing is to select the level of poems which can be really helpful for language learners. If Teachers will use a poem which is high in thought, full of mysticism and metaphysical elements. I think that will not serve the purpose. Instead, it will lose the purpose of using poetry. Students will not be able to understand and they will end in searching for its meaning instead of using it as a challenge. The poems have to be full of enthusiasm and motivation, easy to understand clarity of thought, rhythmic and can encourage and motivate students to learn and use. Teachers have to ask students to enjoy them and use them spontaneously not under any pressure[6]. Imagine human love for music and songs and a talent to remember and repeat them, then and there. Similarly, students can enjoy, read, learn, understand, use and excel in target language with the help of poetry.

In recent years, there has become an undeclared relationship between language and literature. Especially poetry has been used for second language learning. Poetry serves not only an ideal of language but it is a source of motivation for teaching language and it's all four skills i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening. Poetry enables students to pick structure, Grammar, rhyme and rhythm. Although it is observed that language teachers sometimes are not 'comfortable' with the use of poetry in language teaching and learning but research shows that it is useful in providing a strong background of language learning.

8. Conclusions

To end the paper, I must admit that poetry is a useful genre of literature which serves many purposes as and when required. The most important factor of using poetry in second language teaching is to choose correct and appropriate poems. In the beginning, a teacher has to introduce poems which contain emotion, enthusiasm and based on student related themes. This will add their interest and afterwards they can use Romantic poems and poets who describe beauty of Nature. The researches reveal its importance and we the ELT has to use this skill carefully. The best practice is to give opportunity to students to read, write, learn understand and babble them out freely and flawlessly which is the base of language learning. Success of a language teacher is in the students' presentation and output, when we talk about ELT and learning. We, the teachers have to teach our students both literal and figurative English Language, and Poetry will serve our purpose best.

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