

An Observational Study of Poetry Teaching to Tamil Medium High School Students

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com **ISSN 1930-2940** Vol. 13:8 August 2013

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Introduction

Poetry has been given a place of importance in education in India right from the advent of traditional schools. Poetry teaching requires not only the skill to understand the meaning of the poem under consideration but also an earnest desire and motivation to enjoy poetry. Teachers cannot create in their students a desire to read and enjoy poetry if they do not have the right type of inclination to read and enjoy poetry. Poetry is often governed by rhyme and rhythm even though subtle meaning is very important. Poetry should be read aloud so that the rhymes are brought out clearly and through rhymes students will be able to gain some fluency of speaking and reading in English. Elucidation of the meaning through questions further helps students to learn word and appropriate sentences.

Definition of Poetry

A poem can be defined as a literary composition that is given intensity by particular attention to diction, often involving rhyme, rhythm and imagery.

Teaching of Poetry

Poetry provides opportunity to teach several language skills simultaneously (such as reading, memorizing, writing and comprehension). This opportunity should not be missed to develop language skills in students who learn English as their second language. Presently, most schools under the jurisdiction of the Tamilnadu State Government use Tamil as the medium of instruction. English is also taught as a subject.

English Poetry for Tamil Medium Students

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In this situation, we may think that teaching poetry in English is a difficult task for the teachers as the students are more used to using Tamil in the school and outside of the school. However, teachers may be able to devise poetry teaching strategies in such a way the students look at poetry not simply as a poem but also as a way to improve their knowledge and skill in the use of English. In other words, in addition to inculcating poetic sensibility in the students they should also look for ways and means to improve their skill in using English.

What English Language Teachers Do in Tamil Medium Classes

Certainly this dual task sounds difficult to achieve. My field observation revealed that teachers of English do use some consistent teaching methodology for teaching poetry. This teaching methodology is implemented by the teachers to make the students understand the meaning of the poem, to write answers for the questions raised and to present a summary of the content of the poem. Enjoyment of the poem is not ignored, but this is not given a place of importance. At the same time, I also noticed that the current practice enables students to acquire more knowledge of words. If this last step is followed more seriously, we can certainly help students to acquire skill in using English even through the teaching of poetry.

Methodology Followed in Teaching English Poems in Tamil Medium Schools

Teaching of poetry brings out a sense of life to language. Poetry teaching is not just a matter of training the mind but moulding the mind to get into the world of imagination using the words, symbols, signs, metaphors, alliterations, etc. found in the lines of poems.

Teaching English poems is more often a bilingual task in Tamil medium classes. And the English medium classes also adopt this strategy in rural schools.

Useful and Practical Steps

A teacher should have skill in reading the poem and understanding and appreciating the poem. In addition she should also have good presentation skills. In order to acquire and further sharpen such skills, I would highly recommend that the teachers of English visit mother tongue teaching classrooms, sit there and observe how a Tamil teacher teaches her

poems to her students. Such observations will help the English language teacher to identify and adopt some useful techniques, even as these observations will indicate which strategies she should avoid in her own English teaching class. Give and take between language teachers in the school will help both teachers and their students.

Let us maintain a record of our observations. Strategies adopted to sing aloud the lines, to identify the meanings, to describe the relevance of symbols, signs, metaphors, etc. and to summarize the gist of the meaning of the poem must be recorded.

Exercise Your Individual Freedom to Innovate

Public schools must adhere to state standards regarding what can be and should be taught and how it can be and should be presented. However, we also have the individual freedom to make some innovations based on the complexity of the task on hand. For example, a poem written by a poet of Indian Writing in English may be easy to understand and appreciate whereas a native English poem may be difficult to understand readily.

What Should the Teacher of English Poems Do in Tamil Medium Classes?

I believe that the teacher should first of all read the poem aloud several times, and give opportunity to as many students as possible to read parts of the poem aloud in the class. This may be followed by questions and answers as to the meaning of the poem. Students should be encouraged to narrate the meaning as much as they can. When this student exposition of the general meaning is over, teacher may present the meaning of the poem line by line.

I noticed that the above practice is not common in the classes I visited. Teacher reads the poem quickly, almost without any appropriate pause, tone and intonation required. Reading is more or less mechanical. She gives word by word meaning, and usually no clear summary of the content of the poem. She also does not focus on the poetic devices and niceties used in the poem. Since the textbook does not really give the life story of the writer of the poem/s, the teachers do not seem to focus on this aspect much. Unless we bring the

poet into our picture and show how the poem is intimately connected to the poet, interest in the poem cannot be adequately generated.

Poetic Devices

Poetic devices used in the poem can be explained to the students because these will kindle expectation among the students. Some of the following devices may be presented:

1. Simile
2. Metaphor
3. Personification
4. Alliteration
5. Rhyme scheme, etc.
6. Alliteration

Some of the above are based on sound and students may be trained to read these aloud to enjoy the sound effect. Some are based on meaning and these may be described and explained in simple language. Students will really appreciate the techniques adopted and will be able to see the clever use of language and meaning.

Meaning of the Poem

Meaning of words and phrases used in the poem should be indicated to the students. Besides, the teacher should introduce the history and culture related to the poem as background support. Thus, the poet's background, lifestyle and objective matters should be explained through which the students can understand the poem in the correct sense. The duty of the teacher is to make the students explore the innovative ways and to enhance the comprehending skills of the students. The teacher can also explain the connections between the writer and the poem and this will develop further the appreciation power of students. The background support for the poem should be provided for the students and make the students to read the poem by themselves to enjoy the poem on their own.

In other words, our goal should be to help students not only to “learn” the meaning of the poem in the class but also use the poem as an effective means to increase their diction and

grammatical usage and help construct of simple sentences using some of the poetic devices used in the particular poem.

The Process of Teaching a Poem

There are 3 main stages in the process of teaching a poem.

They are as follows:

1. Preparation
2. Presentation
3. Discussion

A Few Additional Suggestions for Teaching a Poem

1. The message of a poem is more important than the details.
2. The main theme of the poem is to be grasped (understood).
3. Mere explanation and paraphrasing do not create any enthusiasm.
4. The teacher should present the poem orally with correct pronunciation and rhythm.
5. Students concentrate all their attention to listen to the citation of the poem in the class.
7. Students' appreciation and understanding of the poem and poet's experience can be expressed in the form of drawing.
8. Encourage pupils to do activities at the end of the class.

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