Poetry Ideas for the Primary Class

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Abstract

Poetry offers a "rich, varied repertoire and a source for much enjoyment for teacher and learner alike" (Collie and Slater, 1987, p. 226). In primary classes, poetry can be exploited to facilitate the learning of language and prepare students for the subsequent encounters with literature at later stages of their education. These benefits can be obtained only with judicious text selections and pedagogical decisions, or else the introduction of poetry at this early stage of education may defeat its purpose and generate aversion to poetry. This paper proposes a language-based approach to poetry for use with high-level primary students in English-medium schools. In order to demonstrate the arguments, the researcher proposes a lesson plan based on a stylistic analysis of a poem.

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Introduction

The nature of poetic communication in poetry is complex. The poet may be the speaker in the poem, or the addressor of its message, or both. The receiver of the message is its reader, but the addressee may be a human or non-human character in the poem, if there happens to be one. The uni-directional sender-message-receiver feature that is characteristic of conventional communication does not obtain in poetry.

Another poetry-specific feature is the arrangement of words on the written page. Conventionally, lines of poetry start with upper case letters regardless of whether or not the beginning of a line corresponds with the beginning of a sentence. The page margins are also not defined by ordinary language typographical conventions, but manipulated by the interplay of the poet's thematic and rhythmic choices for each line. A poetic line would end whenever its thematic and rhythmic slots have been saturated and since the number of these slots is not usually uniform in all lines, the margins tend to be irregular.

The third feature leads to the disconnection from external extended context. There is nothing preceding the poetic text and nothing following it. There are no clues to its interpretation. While some poems refer to external reality, most poems 'create' a reality of their own. The only clue we have as readers to the context of the poetic text and to the features of the reality it creates, are the linguistic choices made by the poet. The detachment of the poem from the immediate social context has the effect of "focusing the reader's attention on the language itself and the way it connects with the patterning of language within the poem" (Widdowson, 1992, p. 26).

The fourth feature follows from the disconnection from the immediate context. Because poetry does refer to the problems found in our conventional reality and the only evidence to the poem's internal context is the language of the poem, poets tend to carefully structure and word their poems so that their language contains everything needed by the reader in the process of interpretation. One aspect of this 'careful structuring' is the introduction of poem-specific language patterns and lexical items. Another, and perhaps more important, aspect is the deliberate ambiguity. Poets do not conventionally have the luxury of extended space available to novelists or playwrights. As a result, poets leave things

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unexplained and unfinished. They leave out the details which they judge to be recoverable by their readers.

These four characteristic features of poetic discourse have many pedagogical implications for the teacher of poetry. Clearly, poets have a specific audience in mind. This audience is not language students, and least of all non-native speaking primary level students. The language of poems is 'fashioned' to meet its artistic design and the perception of reality it propagates. It is not graded for the benefit of school students. Poets are not cooperative; they flout the maxims of conversation, but depend a great deal on the cooperation of readers in making the poems meaningful. In short, poetry calls for an adjustment to our teaching habits and to our students' customary reading habits.

In the primary level language classroom, the job for the poetry teacher is to make a careful selection of texts. The text should relate in one way or another to the students' schematic knowledge of the world of language and of poetry as the genre. It should not present a totally new experience, but at the same time should only be partly familiar. The job for the teacher is also to devise a pedagogy which has the potential to bring out the educational benefits of poetry and "assigns primacy of place to language" (Alaghbary, 2013, p. 24). This paper proposes an approach to poetry for use with high-level primary students in English-medium schools. In order to demonstrate the arguments, the researcher proposes a lesson plan based on a stylistic analysis of a poem. The stylistic analysis has been carried out by the researcher, but is not presented here for considerations of relevance and space. The poem selected is *Indian Women* by Shiv K. Kumar (see *Appendix* for the full text).

The Pedagogy

The proposed pedagogy is in two stages: 1) initiating a response and 2) developing a reading. The aim of the first stage is to stimulate interest in the poem and relate its thematic concerns to the students' previous life experiences. The students are encouraged to brainstorm whatever association of ideas they might have, or experiences they might have had of situations similar to those represented in the text. The students' existing schemata are activated and new schemata built, wherever necessary. At this stage, the students learn to read poetry aloud, read for general ideas (skimming) and read for specific details (scanning).

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The tasks that could be employed to achieve the aims of the stage include reading aloud, hypothesizing about the nature of the theme, predicting a title or choosing one from possible suggestions, asking direct questions about the students' lived experiences, and choosing a word or line that could be central to the poems' concerns. These tasks should help set up the students' mental receptivity before they move on to the second stage.

The aim of the second stage, on the other hand, is to help the students develop a reading of the poem. The tasks employed at this stage sensitize the students to the nature of language organization in poetry and to the possible communicative effects of the linguistic choices made by the poet. The students should be encouraged to discern the patterns used by the poet and infer their possible contribution to their own reading of the poem. The students learn to look *through* language instead of looking *at* language and realize the significance of language choices in the expression of meanings. The difficulty of the tasks at this stage, and at the previous stage, and the degree of demand on the students can be regulated so as to suit the students' language level and their progress in the classroom in response to the tasks.

The Lesson Plan

Stage 1

- Teacher presents a derived version of the text (original not disclosed at this stage and information about the poet also withheld). The class is divided into small groups, and each group is given two copies of the derived test.

> Women don't etch angry eyebrows
>
> On mud walls.
>
> They sit
>
> Pleating hope
>
> Looking into the water's mirror
>
> For the moisture in their eyes.
>
> They guard their tattooed thighs
>
> Waiting for their men's return.

  (Note: this version of the poem has been derived by leaving out the adverbial phrases in the original poem).

- The students are asked to read the poem silently. Teacher provides help with vocabulary when necessary.

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- The students are asked to work out in their groups the poem's thematic concerns. A volunteer from each group is called on to read out the group's reading of the poem (group work is encouraged at the initial stages of exposure to poetry and can be gradually cut down as the students grow more confident).

- The teacher asks the following direct questions on the thematic concerns of the poem:

    - Which women is the speaker talking about?

    - What are the things he says about women?

    - Is the speaker's tone approving or disapproving?

    - What do you think women are like in this country (in the text world)?

    - Does what the speaker say apply to women in your country?

    - Is what the speaker says true about you (for girl students)?

    - Do you think the speaker in the poem is male or female? What makes you think so?

    - Which country do you think the women in the poem are from? What makes you think so?

    - Which country do you think the poet is from? What makes you think so?

- The teacher now tells the class that the poem they have read is a derived version of the original poem. The teacher projects the original poem onto the board (or hands out copies of it).

- The students reconvene in their respective groups and read the poem silently (dictionary work is allowed at this stage but kept at the minimum level).

- The teacher reads out the text and so do volunteers from each group.

- The teacher asks the students if their readings of the derived texts have changed after meeting the original text (e.g. do the identities of the women and the speaker become clearer?)

- Teacher projects three possible titles of the poem and asks the students to choose the one that suits their reading of the poem:

    o The Life of Women

    o The Weaker Sex

    o Indian Women

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- Teacher projects the original title of the poem and the name of its writer onto the board. The class discusses the poem in light of the new information. The teacher relates the discussion to the situation of women in India and elicits the students' views on the issue.

Stage 2

- The teacher asks the students (who are still working in groups) to underline the word/phrase/line which they think is central to their reading of the poem.
- The students are asked to list the dependent structures in the poem (e.g. adverbs and prepositional phrases) and infer the possible significance of this abundance of dependent structures to the theme of the poem.
- The students are asked to find out which word (or words) in the poem is capitalized and infer the possible significance of their findings.
- The students are asked to analyze the only simile in the poem (Lines 5,6 and 7) and find out

  o Who is compared to the things presented?

  o What is it compared to?

  o What is the aspect of the comparison?

  o Is the simile positive or negative?

- The students are asked to examine other images related to Indian women by examining the other language choices and integrate these authorial choices into their own reading of the poem [e.g. triple-baked continent (Line 1), etch (Line 2), pleating hope (Line 7), tattooed thighs (Line 12)].
- The teacher presents an example of structural ambiguity (Lines 9 and 10) and asks the students to suggest the two possible readings of the lines.
- The teacher presents the following possible readings of the poem and asks the students to choose the one that is closest to their own reading and defend it against language choices made by the poet:

  - The poet is describing the life of women in India and emphasizing their dependence on men in everything they do.
  - The poet is depicting the miserable condition of women in India and emphasizing their weakness and helplessness in a male-dominated society.

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- The poet is describing the passiveness of women in India and emphasizing their acceptance of a life in the margin and their participation in their own misery.
- The students are asked to expand the interpretation of their choice into a one-page 'response' interpretation into which they integrate their schematic knowledge of the theme of the poem and the linguistic clues that have been 'discovered' in the second stage of the pedagogy (this is a take-home assignment to be collected when the class meets again).

Conclusion

In order that the teaching brings out the cognitive and linguistic benefits that can be obtained from encounter with poetry, teachers need to select texts whose representational content is fairly familiar and whose linguistic structure is reasonably challenging. The job for the primary class teacher is also to devise a pedagogy which allows for the interaction of the students' schematic knowledge of the world with the experience represented in the text and which starts from the students' awareness of language structure and aims to extend that awareness. This paper has proposed a language-based pedagogy for use with high-level primary students in English-medium schools. It may be emphasized, by way of conclusion, that the set of pedagogical suggestions offered is in no way sacrosanct. It may be adjusted or changed in accordance with the dictates of the selected poetic text and/or the particularities of the primary classroom.

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APPENDIX

The Poem[1]

Indian Women

      In this triple-baked continent

women don't etch angry eyebrows

on mud walls.

      Patiently they sit

      like pitchers

      on the mouth of the village well

pleating hope in each braid

of their mississipi-long hair

looking deep into the water's mirror

      for the moisture in their eyes.

      with zodiac doodling on the sands

      they guard their tattooed thighs

waiting for their men's return

till even the shadows

roll up their contours

      and are gone

      beyond the hills.

[1] Kumar, Shiv K. (1974). *Cobwebs in the Sun*. New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill.

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