RESEARCH ARTICLE

LANGUAGE THROUGH LITERATURE: TEACHING POEMS TO DEVELOP LEARNER'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS(LEVEL THREE, HODEIDAH UNIVERSITY)

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ABSTRACT

The study is an attempt to explore the effects of a specially designed course of poems to develop the learners' language and literary skills. The question the study aims to answer is "Does the course help the learners develop their proficiency in language and literary skills?" In order to answer the question the study studied the course for a period of four months. This was preceded and followed by pre-and post-tests. The pre- and post-tests result show that there is a very significant improvement of the learners' English language and literary skills. This significant increase is primarily due to the intervention-the course.

Keywords: language development; selected poems; low-proficient learners; reading-phases

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of the English poetry in the faculty of education, Zabid, Yemen is dominated by the old Western Poetry (England/ American Poets). Most of these poems are long and difficult. Furthermore, the theme, plot and culture are not related to the learners' environment or cultural background and what makes the situation still worse is that most of the teachers follow the old prescribed syllabi and old teaching methods. The teachers follow the old traditional methods of explaining the texts. What makes the matter worse is that the learners are low proficient in English, at the same time, they have negative attitude toward English poems. They think poetry courses are difficult. This is due to the lack of exposure to poems in the secondary school's materials. They also lack the basic English language skills. They cannot write a simple sentence in English or analyze or criticize a simple poem even in Arabic, their mother tongue. Thus, the main objective of this study is to remedy this situation and help the leaners develop both language and literary skills through simple and modern poems.

The selection of the poems was based on the well-known criteria of the materials production; such as the age of the students, their emotional and intellectual maturity and their interest and hobbies. According to Lazar (52); Collie and Slater (226) and Brumfit (24) while selecting teaching materials, the editors should choose texts that suit the students' level, cultural background, linguistic proficiency and literary background.

While preparing the materials, the researcher, took these criteria into consideration. Twelve poems are selected from different anthologies by different poets to remedy the situation and change the attitude of the learners toward the poetry course. The materials are graded from simple to difficult.

2.   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Poetry, like other literary texts, has many uses and benefits in the English language classroom. It provides good practices in developing both language and literary skills. In the classroom, poetry has several benefits. According to Finch poetry in the writing class can provide an effective and collaborative means of language learning and personal expression. Through poems learners can express ideas that are meaningful to them (1). Hess considers a poem a vehicle that can shape both one's thought and language (1). According to Hedge poems are authentic materials and can be used to develop reading skills (cited inÇetinavcı and Tütüniş 67). According to Lazar poems are good for developing basic language skills. They can be used to help students easily learn the aspect of the target language, such as stress, pitch, and intonation (15). According toWidowson poetry deviates from the norms of language. Therefore poetry can communicate with learners in a fresh and original way (146). According toBurkhardt (3-4) and Hişmanoğlu, (54) poetry exposure helps students enhance their academic skills, including reading, writing and critical thinking. It is seen as a perfect tool for development of language skills due to its imagery, shortness, vocabulary and multiplicity. So, using poetry in the classroom makes learners engage in creative and critical thinking. It therefore, enhances learners' language acquisition and develops their language skills and helps them learn the tools of genre (imagery, alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, etc.).According to Tomlinson poems that express strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions, or ideas are usually more productive than those which are gentle, descriptive, or neutral" (36).

In addition, Raghavanstates that poems offer the teacher of English countless chances that make students interact emotionally, intellectually and physically which lead to a good learning (40). Collie and Slater say that poems are rich materials. Poems are sources of enjoying for both teacher and learners. They enable learners experiencing the power of language. Therefore, the use of poems in the classroom especially with those who learn English language as foreign language will help learners produce strong response and motivate them for further poetry reading (226). Bower says that, poetry has some advantages because; most of the poems can be read and enjoyed in one sitting. Poetry can also effectively create pictures in the mind of the readers better than novel or short stories (260). Kellem argues that "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 (12). According to Llach poems become favourite tools for language teachers. It has some unusual ways of ordering words, giving imaginative meaning to words, combining sounds in a musical way. (5).

3.   METHODS

3.1.   Participants

The study was confined to poetry classes, level three of the English department, Zabid College. These were eighty-one students in the class. They have to study their prescribed poetry course with their teacher. So, it was not easy for the researcher to experiment his materials and neglect the prescribed syllabus of the English department with this class. Therefore, the researcher had to find another way to experiment his materials. With the help of the head of English department, thirty students out of eighty-one were randomly selected to be the subject of the study. These thirty students had also to attend the poetry class with their teacher (prescribed course).

3.2.   Research Instruments

3.2.1.   Materials Preparation and Description

The materials were prepared to develop both language and literary skills. In order to accomplish these two main purposes, the activities were designed to involve students to interact with the poems. These materials, therefore,are graded. Each activity leads smoothly to the next one during three reading-phases; pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading.

In order to create a good background of the poem before being read or taught, we have to activate the prior knowledge of the learners. According to Slater warming-up is often very important to arouse the learners' curiosity and involve them with the themes of the poem (226). According to Kundu 2015 (19) and Ringler and Weber (cited in Ajideh 6-7) the primary purpose of pre-reading activity is to motivate the students read the text. So, the main purposes of this phase are to help students get general ideas of the poem.

While-reading phase can help students improve their abilities to become more fluent in English language. Students can be also developed especially in the areas of listening, speaking and reading. Moreover, the primary aim of this phase is to develop both the language and literary skills of the students with especial emphasis on developing reading comprehension. It also, aims at encouraging the students to develop their language skills through language- based, learner-centred activities.While-reading activities aim at helping the students to experience the text holistically by developing a fruitful interaction between the text and the reader (Panavelil 13). So, in order to answer all the questions, students have to go back to the poem again and again by themselves with little help from the teacher. So, in this case, the language learning here will be a by-product as it is stated by Kundu 1993 "Language is best learnt if it is taught indirectly or is acquired through unconscious process".

In order to evaluate how much students understood in while reading. The while-reading is to be followed by post-reading activities. According to Panavelil 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 (13). Most importantly, however, this phase will give the exercises a sense of meaning so that our students feel they already have achieved something. This includes activities such as; true or false, language games, synonyms and antonyms, critical writing…. etc. So, the main purpose of this phase is to develop mainly writing skill. Thus, all these stage are meant for developing both language and literary skills in an interesting and comprehensible way.

3.2.2. Materials Experimentation

The materials were experimented at level three of the English department, Faculty of Education Zabid, Hodeidah University during 7/10/ 2014 to 6/1/2015. The main objectives of the course were to help the learners develop both their language and literary skills according to the learning need of the learners. So, these poems were taught to them using different teaching/ learning strategies during the whole course through three different reading phases: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading.

a)   Pre-Reading Phase

Before teaching the poem, the researcher asked the learners some questions related to the theme/ topic of the text. These questions aimed at involving the learners to make use of their prior backgrounds and experiences which help them predict what is coming in the text.

b)   While-Reading Phase

During this phase, the researcher helped the learners develop a purposeful interaction between the text and the learners. The researcher first read the poem loudly, clearly with feeling to draw the leaners' attention toward the text, while the leaners listened silently without opening the text. In order to check the listen comprehension, the researcher asked the learners "What is the poem about?" Then he read the poem once again while learners listened and followed the text. To develop the speaking skills, the learners were encouraged to read the poem stanza by stanza, one read the first stanza the next read the second one and so on till the whole class read the poem. The learners therefore had to read the poem silently before doing the comprehension activities. At this stage, the researcher helped the learners develop the following skills:

1.   Scanning and skimming for specific pieces of information.
2.   Predicting what is coming next.
3.   Identifying the main idea of the poem.
4.   Identifying the rhyme schemes of the poem.
5.   Distinguishing between general and specific ideas.
6.   Playing the language games (split the poem, poem reorder, about me…etc.)

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7.   Guessing word meanings by using context clues, word formation clues or cognates.

8.   Recognizing lexical clues (e.g. reference words).

9.   Identifying the figurative language.

10.   Reading the text critically.

c)   Post-Reading Phase

In order to evaluate how much students understood in while reading, there should be post-reading activities. This phase gave the learners the opportunity to reread the text again and again. Most importantly, this phase gave the learners the feeling that they can do some activities based on the poem. So, the main purpose of this phase was to develop mostly writing skill. They had to do some activities such as; true or false, language games, matching synonym and antonyms, critical writing, writing similar poems etc.

3.2.3.   Pre-and Post-Tests

A total of 30 students were selected to participate in the present study. Pre-test and post-test were given to the same group to measure their proficiency in language and literary skills and their performance before and after the experimental course (intervention).

4.   DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data has been collected through the students' pre- and post-tests. It provided the researcher with accurate and concrete results for the purpose of the study. Pre-and post-tests aimed at providing the researcher with actual status of the learners' development in both language and literary skills before and after the experimentation.   Then, all results of the tests were transferred into the Statistical Software of Social Science (SPSS). Tables, charts and histograms have been used for the differences of marks and their normality distributions in pre- and post-tests.

After carrying out the processes of keying in and coding all marks in SPSS software properly, the researcher started the process of analysis. One of the main concern of data analysis was checking how the differences of marks in pre- and post-tests are distributed. It was found that the data is normally distributed according to the statistical methods which depend on retaining and rejecting the null hypothesis of the significance of p value (p. $>$/$\leq$ .05). The normality distribution of the differences in marks (i.e. pre- and post-tests) would be certified in the following graphical outputs which visually indicate that the marks are approximately and normally distributed.

The focus was on the graphic figures of the tests which showed normality distribution of marks in both pre- and post-tests. The Histograms has the approximate shape of the normal curve (see figure 1). Additionally, throughout the Normal Q-Q Plot, the dots which represent the participants' marks are regularly distributed along the line of normality (see figure 6.20). Hence, the results certainly indicated that the differences of marks in the pre- and post-tests (paired values) are normally distributed. In addition, the analysis indicates that the test was valid.
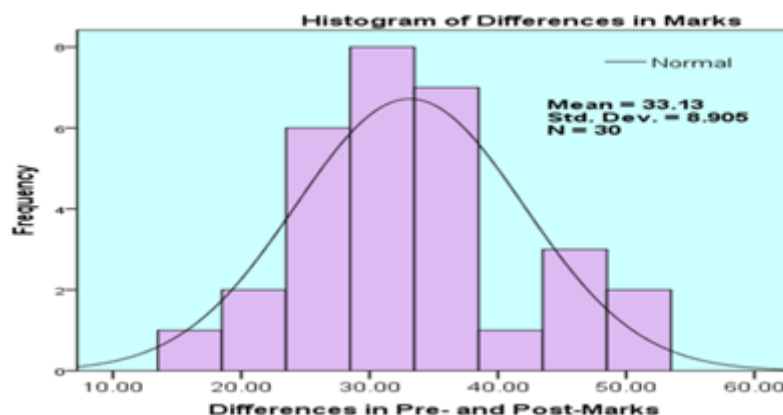

Figure (1) Graphical Indicator of the Normality Test: Histogram

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5. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The researcher analyzed the data collected from the pre- and post-tests through pair-simples t-test which assumes normality of data. The researcher, therefore, calculated the test to get the "means", "std. deviations" and "T" value of the research's group before and after the experimentation as displayed in Table (1) below. For more details on the per-and post-tests analysis please see Appendix A:

Table (1) Pair-Simples T-Test

Pair 1& 2	Pre-Test		Post-Test		df	t	Sig.
	Mean	St. D	Mean	St. D			
30	41.83	9.903	74.97	8.865	29	20.380	.000

As seen from table (1) above, the students' marks in the post-test are more than their marks in the per-test. Before experimenting the course, the mean of their marks was (41.83) in the pre-test whereas after experimenting the course, the mean of their marks is (74.97) in the post-test with a t-statistic (20.380), p= 0.01 and df (29) which indicates that there was a significant difference in results between the per- and post-tests. Comparisonbetween the means of the students in the pre-test and the post-test shows the gap between their marks. The gap between the mean of marks of the students in the pre-test and their mean in the post-test is 33.13. This means, the experimental course could develop the learners' language and literary skills through poems.

The means of the students' marks before and after the intervention supports the hypothesis and context of the study. Furthermore, the mean of the students' marks in the pre-test is 41.83. The result of the proficiency test (pre-test) supports the study that the learners of English Department, Faculty of Education, Zabid are really low proficient learners in English. The result, therefore, indicates that the learners could not answer the language and literary skills questions in the pre-test properly due to their low proficiency in English. These findings are supported by Yusef at al. (2016, 7) andAl-Refa'ae, J (2007, 6) as they found that most of the Yemeni learners are low-proficient in English. The researcher found that most of the learners have problems with handwriting spellings of words, punctuation marks and about 80% are incapable of writing a correct simple sentence in English. According to Kundu, (2015 b 9) the low-proficient learners are the learners whose levels of proficiency are too much poor in English language. They therefore are those who constitute about 80% to 90% in the class.

Similar findings supported the finding of the current study. In a study byÇetinavcı and Tütüniş's the experimental group students gained an additional positive viewpoint on poetry. They found that the experimental group responded to the use of poetry in the language classroom positivelymuch better thanthe control group (83). Another study is carried out in a Saudi context at King Saud University by the scholars Hamdoun and Hussian. The sample of the study was a group of 40 undergraduate students of first year, College of Languages and Translation.The researcher divided the group into control and experimental groups. The experimental group was exposed to a syllabus based on literary texts including all the genres of English literature and covering all-skills based on language exercises. The control group was exposed to the core language course books on the four skills covering the same components which selected for instruction during the whole semester. Both groups were given per- and post- tests to measure their performances. In the pre-test the groups scored the same marks but in the post-test, there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental (33.3) and control group (20.4).

Thus, in the present study, the researcher found that the increase of scores of the subjects in the post-test was very significant (74.97). This significant increase was primarily due to the intervention. The increase of marks was reasonable. The reasonable increase might be partly due to the fact that the proposed course (Remedial) helped the learner's' develop both their language and literary skills.

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APPENDIX A

Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Post-test	74.9667	30	8.86482	1.61849
	Pre-test	41.8333	30	9.90327	1.80808

Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Post-test &Pre-test	30	.555	.001

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
					Lower
Pair 1	Post-test - Pre-test	33.13333	8.90460	1.62575	29.80830

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			
		Upper			
Pair 1	Post-test - Pre-test	36.45837	20.380	29	.000

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