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PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES IN TEACHING ENGLISH POETRY IN AN ESL CLASSROOM:
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

Traditional practice in teaching poetry has been to give learners background information about the poet's life, age, society etc. The teachers could direct learners to the Library where he would find many books on the poet's life. There seems to be no reason why students would know the birth/death dates of poet, the titles of their works, and so on. What is important for students (at any level) is their familiarity with some examples of good literature that would influence their style and thought. Another practice in the past has been (and is still going on) in many situations to explain the poems word by word and line by line, or by paraphrasing it. If a teacher does all this a student has nothing to do. A good teacher will always leave something for students to do so that they can develop their critical faculty. He would allow sufficient time to learners to go deep into the poem and share the experiences expressed by the poet.

Keywords: Drama, Language, Poetry, Teaching

English in spite of being a foreign language has always occupied a unique position in the educational system in India. Though it received a great setback after independence, it continues to be a major language having a prestigious position in our society. From the beginning of the independence, it receives a hostile treatment not only at the hands of our political leaders but also some eminent scholars. The great leader Mahatma Gandhi himself opposed educating the Indians in English because it deprived them to of their national respect and resulted in slavish behavior. Though there were some people who advocated the urge of English for oblivious reason. English had been the medium of instruction, the language of administration and law; and the main vehicle of communication with the rulers. Therefore, the abolition of English would have had an advance effect on education and administration. Both Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and C. Rajagopalachari realized that the abolition of English would be a great setback to the cause of education in India. Pundit Nehru also voiced these fears when he said that English acted as the major window for the Indians to the world and its closure would spell peril for our future. Soon after dethroning of English people began to feel that growing value cannot be overlooked any more. It was decided that for a successful completion of the first degree course, a student should possess an adequate command over English, be able to express himself with ease and felicity, and avail himself of its literature. Therefore, a proper emphasis will have

to be laid on its study as a language right from the very early stage. English should be the most useful 'library language' in higher education and our most significant window on the world. At present it is essential to fulfill the dream of 'global village'.

A poem is a work of art and display of craftsmanship of the poet in using words to give expression to his emotions, feelings and experiences. They offer a rich, varied repertoire and area source of enjoyment for learners and teachers alike. The language that poetry uses is not the same that we normally use in day to day communication. This language does not have the same structure as the language of prose. Poetry is recreating language. The poet deliberately uses words in a way that ordinary speakers of the language cannot. His words carry more meaning or multiple meaning than we could normally think of in real life communication. F.L. Billows opines:

"We can compare prose to walking, moving from one place to another on the surface of the earth, getting the world's daily work done; poetry may be compared then to dancing, rising above the surface of the earth, perceiving its relation, getting its fuller view of its reality."(233)

The aim of teaching poetry is basically to enable learners to understand and appreciate it as a piece of art in the same way as one appreciates a good painting/ picture. R. N. Ghosh says, "the language of the poem is at least as important as the content which it presumably conveys...(93)." The use of poetry in ESL classrooms enables students to investigate the aspects of linguistics and conception of the written text without concentrating on the mechanics of language. Especially if the poem is in dialogue form (as most of the ballads are) it acts as a powerful tool in simulating learning while acquiring a second language because learners become intellectually, emotionally and physically involved in the target language within the framework of the culture. Poetry rich in dialogues provides students with a dramatic script. Drama places the learners in situations that seem real. Learners use the target language for specific purposes, and a language is more easily internalized and is, therefore, remembered. Nobody can enjoy a poem unless he understands it. But comprehending a poem may not be simple for learners. A teacher's job is to help the learners not only to appreciate the poem but also understand it by drawing their attention to the different nuances of meaning that words can get in poetry.

Traditional practice in teaching poetry has been to give learners background information about the poet's life, age, society etc. The teachers could direct learners to the Library where he would find many books on the poet's life. There seems to be no reason why students would know the birth/death dates of poet, the titles of their works, and so on. What is important for students (at any level) is their familiarity with some examples of good literature that would influence their style and thought. Another practice in the past has been (and is still going on) in many situations to explain the poems word by word and line by line, or by paraphrasing it. If a teacher does all this a student has nothing to do. A good teacher will always leave something for students to do so that they can develop their critical faculty. He would allow sufficient time to learners to go deep into the poem and share the experiences expressed by the poet.

Not all the learners understand poetry in the same manner and at the same speed. Individual differences in learners should always be kept in mind. They must be given sufficient time to go through a poem on their own so that they appreciate it fully. The best way to introduce a poem is to read it aloud. It is the responsibility of the teacher to guide the language learning process by-

1. Modeling pronunciation, intonation, stress, rhythm, and oral expression.
2. Facilitating comprehension of vocabulary, idioms, cultural aspects, and plot.
3. Stimulating interests, and conversation and interacting with the students.
4. Creating a student- participating language learning experiences.

A good teacher should always be familiar with the rhyme, pitch and intonation pattern of English. If possible, a teacher must use pre-recorded (readymade) materials. But enjoyment cannot have without understanding. The teacher may ask simple questions to check whether his students understand the poem.

Visual aids like pictures, drawings etc. can be used to help learners comprehend the poem. Many poems are rich in graphic imagery. Simple drawing on board could enhance the interest of students and help them to understand a poem better. It is very important that different activities- individual, pair or group are designed to involve the learners in a poem's theme. For instance, before a poem is read or listened to, it is important that a warm up activity (also called brainstorming) is given to arouse learner's curiosity. A warm up activity could be a nursery rhyme, a song from English as learner's mother tongue for which the learners are asked to sing for identifying similarities/ differences in the various rhymes. As the teacher can ask simple questions to the students to make ensure about the concepts of them regarding the poem, these questions arouse their curiosity and help them in developing one of the important sub-skills in reading, prediction/guessing/anticipating. Like prose, the teacher should plan his poetry lessons beforehand and give stresses all that he wants to say about a poem.

The initial advantage of poems is their length: many poems can be finished in a single class. However, longer poems might take a little longer, Depending on the size of the poem it could be broken into two or more parts. A special care should be taken to invigorate the learners: the previous part is read aloud before the next class begins. The teacher does not need to read that himself, he can ask a student to read the earlier portion. Whatever activities the teacher selects, he should encourage students both to develop their own responses to poetry and to read and appreciate poetry in English on their own. In a poetry teaching class when a teacher creates drama with poetry, it is a matter of an exciting language learning experience of learners. They employ their multi-sensory approaches, that is, physical, emotional, and cognitive to acquire it in the language learning process. In an ESL classroom dramatic representation of poetry enables the students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text without concentrating on the mechanics of language. They are able to develop a sense of awareness of self in the mainstream culture through the dramatic interpretations of the poems. Language learning becomes internalized as a direct result of placing the learners in situations that seem real. Students use the target language for the specific purposes of communication. They make experiments with non-verbal communicative aspects of language (body language, gestures, and facial expressions), as well as verbal aspects (intonation, rhythm, stress, slang, and idiomatic expressions), while interpreting the poems. They begin to feel the language and gain the confidence to interact outside the classroom using the target language.

Some mini-drama poems, often written in dialogue form are suitable for dramatization because they are short and usually have one simple, but strong emotional theme. Those poems which are expressing strong emotions, attitudes, feelings, opinions, or ideas are usually productive for learners. Learners become engaged in free flowing improvised conversations as they interact with one another prior to the dramatizations and during the improvisations. They compare and contrast behaviors and attitudes, analyze and explore linguistic and conceptual differences between the written and spoken word, and interact co-operatively to orchestrate the dramatizations and improvisations.

In this technique of teaching though it seems that students have more responsibility for their own learning, this does not diminish the liability of the teacher in the instructional process. It is the responsibility of the teacher to guide them with the proper pronunciation, intonation, stress, rhythm, and oral expression; comprehension of vocabulary, idioms, cultural aspects, and plot; and lastly interacting with the students in conversations.

This approach should be followed by the teacher providing the students with the background to the poem and introduces difficult or unusual vocabulary. He then reads the poem aloud to the students so that the class discusses it together for better understanding. Again he inspires them by re-reading it. Now the students try the poem to read chorally and then take turns reading it aloud individually. After understanding the matter of the poem the students prepare themselves to dramatize it by selecting character roles and discussing scenery, props, lighting, and costumes. For proper implementation they rehearse the dramatization of the poem and then do an improvisation based on the poem. The class discusses the improvisation after a minute experimentation of character interactions and dialogues.

Here is shown some poems that have been used successfully and are recommended for high intermediate or advanced adult ESL learners. A poem entitled "Love in Brooklyn" by John Wakeman fits in this category smoothly. The students portray characters in a love relationship and compare and contrast cultural views [..."I love you, Horowitz," he said, and blew his nose. She splashed her drink..."]. An experimentation with colloquialisms, epithets, and slang can be made by the students and learning of using language appropriately for different interpersonal situations [..."The hell you say," he said.] [..."You wanna bet?" he asked.] is possible. The dramatization of a poem also creates faculty among the students to interpret and practice using body language as a means of non-verbal communication [..."She took his hand in hers and pressed it hard. And his plump fingers trembled in her lap."]. Another poem which fits properly is Carl Sandburg's "Why Did the Children Put Beans in Their Ears?" The Students portray a husband and a wife who ask two rhetorical questions about why children do things that they are expressively told not to do ["Why did the children put beans in their ears..."] [..."Why did the children pour molasses on the cat..."]. The presentation of the poems dramatically increases chances among the students to utilize intonation, rhythm, stress, body language, facial expressions, and gestures to convey the frustrated interchange between the disgruntled and bewildered characters [..."when the one thing we told the children they must not do was..."]. And the last but not least of my discussion is "Read This with Gestures" by John Ciardi, which may be recommended for advanced beginners and low intermediate level young children. In the continuous process of the dramatization, one student speaks to one or more people ["It isn't proper, I guess you know,..."] In the improvisation, students may co-operatively dialogue the four actions; the students read, dramatize, and improvise the poem with gestures as indicated by the poem's title ["...dip your hands--like this--in the snow..."] ["...make a snowball..."] ["...look for a hat..."] ["...try to knock it off--like that!"]. A teacher who is in an ESL classroom needs to create a poetry file by carefully selecting and categorizing a substantial variety of poems. A special consideration must be given to appropriateness of the following while selecting the poems:

1. students' language level skills
2. students' ages
3. students' interests

The categorization of the poems makes them easy for reference and integration into other instructional disciplines (i.e., science, health, mathematics, and citizenship) and themes (i.e., holidays and seasons). For further facilitation of the communicative approach to second language acquisition, the ESL teacher can record the dramatizations and improvisations as earlier also said. The conversation skill of the learners is likely to be emerged or extended when the students relive their experiences through tape recordings, video recordings, and still photography. For the individual expressions of the cooperative experiences the ESL teacher must plan follow-up activities about the dramatizations and improvisations. He must enrich the students by increasing among them the faculty of illustration and writing the activity of the poems. He can include the dramatization and improvisation of short stories, fables, and plays for further future lessons.

The using of poetry in a proportionate manner in the ESL classroom enables students to explore the linguistic and conceptual aspects of the written text without concentrating on the mechanics of language. To conclude the effect of the dramatization of poetry it can be said that it is a powerful tool in stimulating learning while acquiring a second language because the learner's faculty of intellect, emotion and physics become involved in the target language within the framework of the new set-up.

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