
A Poetic Approach to Teaching English: Personal Account

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Abstract

This paper is a personal account of teaching English vocabulary through rhythmic patterns, including short verses. It debunks the longstanding view that poetry is hard to learn and teach. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study demonstrated how poetry could be a valuable tool for both learners and teachers. It derives illustrations from the researcher's personal experience teaching English as a foreign language through short poems. In the study, ten short poems were used to clarify that poetry, which has taken a backseat in English language teaching for years, can now be a vivid teaching approach that numerous teachers and ELT experts have lately advocated, viewing verse-based teaching as motivational, amusing, and scaffolding. Based on the discussion, the study recommends using simple and easy-to-understand verses to enhance vocabulary learning, partly because rhyming words are more memorable and useable in conversational English. The study concluded with some suggestions to strengthen evidence of the viability of poetry in TESOL programs.

Keywords: Poetry, English Learning, TESOL Programs, Vocabulary

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Introduction

Teaching English has lately witnessed tremendous changes. In the beginning of emerging ELT as a scientific field of study, much concern was inclined toward grammatical rules. Prominent space was scarcely allotted for literature in formal teaching beyond memorizing some literary texts for the sake of literature, not as a resource or technique to teach the target language (Cox, 2012; Chen, 2014; Choudhary, 2016). After remaining "peripheral to ELT curricula and L2 teacher education" (Boldireff & Bober, 2021, p. 3), the idea of employing aspects of English literature in learning and teaching English has been argued for and examined in several contexts alongside the birth of the humanistic curriculum (Al-Kadi, 2018). Literature gradually found its way to TESOL programs and courses quite a while ago. The emergence of the humanistic approach to teaching foreign languages gave it a solid ground in the second half of the twentieth century onwards (Al-kadi, 2018). Many textbooks are now based on short stories (Mohammed, 2022), songs, riddles, and poems (Al-Kadi & Hezam, 2021). Many previous studies rest on teaching English through literature (Chen, 2014; Cox, 2012). Nevertheless, many TESOL teachers and educators still believe that literature is challenging to handle by learners (Boldireff & Bober, 2021), especially the newbies. For this reason, the author advocates this article to show how this assumption is groundless. It toes the line of previous attempts to advance research on employing poetry in L2 classes. It also aims to get voices in the field to back up the idea of using poetry for teaching English at all levels of study.

Poetry, which has taken a backseat in English language teaching materials for years, is now a driving force that many advocates view as a resource rather than a fad in TESOL materials. The exiting paper departs from discarding the "longstanding stigma attached to the use of poetry in English Language Teaching" (Boldireff & Bober, 2021, p.3) - a stigma that led to excluding poetry from TESOL materials for decades. Maybe this is due to linguistic and cultural barriers manifested in the "elliptical, metaphorical and highly allusive language of poetry" (Çetinavcı & Tütüniş, 2012, p. 75).

In this paper, the author contributes ten poems of his own poetry, reporting on a personal experience of using such short poems in teaching English vocabulary to undergraduate students in a diversity of Arab EFL contexts, including Yemen and Tunisia. It gives a rationale to re-position poetry in the textbook and informs teachers and EFL syllabus designers to think about literature as a resource for second language learning. It dilutes the idea that poetry is complex and difficult to master if integrated into the L2 textbooks. It may extemporize change and update the curriculum, not only at the university level but also at the primary and secondary school, wherein pupils can sing and chant and enjoy the pleasure of poetry.

Literature Incorporation in TESOL Programs

Many previous studies explored literature in TESOL situations in several L2 contexts. For instance, Choudhary (2016) argued that literature is helpful for learners to improve their pronunciation, spelling, and meaning (Cahnmann-Taylor & Hwang, 2019; Jeffries, 1998). The authors argued further that literary texts enhance learners' imagination, creativity, and sense of criticism, an assertion supported by Proitsaki (2019). It also enhances self-image and identity (Cahnmann-Taylor & Hwang, 2019). Al-Kadi and Hezam (2021) argued that using literature in TESOL programs "expands the ecology of language learning and promotes critical thinking skills and acculturation of the target groups of learners" (p. 79). It should be noted here that literature is too broad. Teachers should specify what sort of literature they should use to revamp certain aspects of the target language. For Rachmatia (2015), "literature serves as a resource for language learning, not as an end in itself" (p. 2). Teaching poetry, Cahnmann-Taylor and Hwang (2019) argued, illuminates how "the language classroom becomes a site for dialogic collaboration, two-way exchanges where creative meaning-making can occur for both teacher and student alike" (p. 1).

Rachmatia (2015) provided linguistic, methodological and motivational reasons for using literature in teaching the target language. Linguistically, it exposes learners “to real, authentic usage of language in literary texts; these texts show them a variety of styles, registers and language learning materials at several stages of difficulty” (p.3). Methodologically, it opens the door wide for enormous interpretations and arguments which revamp classroom discussions and beyond. It is motivational as it stimulates learners to state their opinion, argue, accept or discard ideas, and relate the topic to real experiences in their life. In a study conducted by Rodríguez (2018), learners in the study found poetry helpful in learning not only vocabulary but also language structures and meaning. Rodríguez suggested poetry be integrated “as authentic language material that can complement other conventional instructional resources such as textbooks, videos, and grammar books” (p. 374). Additionally, Çetinavcı and Tütüniş (2012) argued that poetry is beneficial not only for elevating vocabulary but also for reading and practicing the language, writing and re-writing as well as oral skills. Despite these claims, empirical evidence of how poetry enhances the target language, viz. English, is relatively thin and requires more investigation.

For a long time in the history of ELT, a common belief among educators and teachers prevailed that the language of poetry is far from the language used in TESOL materials, with few exceptions of verses that some textbooks include as chants, riddles, or songs. This is an old belief and has been gradually done away, and there is a lot of research in the present-day ELT, where literature is accepted as a source of language teaching. Ramos Ibo (2019), Amanda Naylor and Audrey Wood (2017), among others, have come out with brilliant books on teaching poetry and can be used as resource books for this matter. Despite that, it is still common in several EFL contexts, including the context of the current study, that poetry is difficult to learn and teach.

Poetry Enhances Language learning

Teaching English through poetry has been the topic of several studies (Agirrezabal, Alegria & Hulden, 2016; Antika, 2016; Çetinavcı & Tütüniş, 2012; Eur, n.d.; Rachmatia, 2015; Proitsaki, 2019). Çetinavcı and Tütüniş, (2012) see that poetry as “a multi-purpose and multi-functional tool to teach a foreign language” (p. 75). On this theme, Eur (n.d) organized a seminar on how poetry could be a good source of English acquisition, using illustrative poems from Billy Collins, D.C. Berry, Robert Francis, John Keats, George Crabbe, W. B. Yeats, and Robert Frost. It would be helpful to quote one of the poems in the study that was used to exemplify the relationship between the meaning and form of a poem. Robert Francis, in 1949, wrote the following poem.

Words of a poem should be glass
 But glass so simple-subtle its shape
 Is nothing but the shape of what it holds.
 A glass spun for itself is empty,
 Brittle, at best Venetian trinket.
 Embossed glass hides the poem or its absence.
 Words should be looked through,
 should be windows. The best words were invisible.
 The poem is the thing the poet thinks.
 If the impossible were not and if the glass, only the glass,
 Could be removed, the poem would remain

Besides the rhythmic patterns, Agirrezabal, Alegria and Hulden (2016) believe that such poetic language is suitable for learners to identify the rhythmic patterns, which by itself is amusing and encourages problem-solving. Additionally, Proitsaki (2019) believes that “biographical information about the poet can help students contextualize” the poems and give rise to discussions on the poet and poems. That said, Rachmatia (2015) believes

poetry is a good source that should be invested in the ELT classroom. In Rachmatia's word, poetry "enriches and energizes the learning environment" (p. 5), believing that it could be used to teach several aspects of the target language, including metric English and grammar (Rodriguez (2018). It also builds a positive attitude.

Teachable Poetry

It is safe to say that not all poems are suitable for teaching in all contexts and levels. What might be good for one context could be clumsy for another (Al-Kadi, 2018; Al-kadi & Hezam, 2020; Proitsaki, 2019). Rachmatia (2015) suggested several types of poems that could possibly be taught: pattern poems, picture poems, Pop-song poems, and Haiku. The latter, as defined by Rachmatia, "present pairs of contrasting images, followed by observation thus evoking mood and emotion, but leaving commentary to the reader. The content of haiku is also close to nature, so the students can get the point easily because the content is closer to their lives" (p. 8). Proitsaki (2019) also believe that the poems selected for teaching purposes should be simple and short with exceptional word choice that enriches the poets with imagery and theme that promote learners' curiosity and appetite to ask questions and grow a sense of the argument. In the present paper, the researcher believes that, besides these criteria, there should be some factors including context-bound criteria, cultural aspects, and religious sensitivity.

Method

This inquiry, in which the researcher positioned himself as a teacher and poet, draws on Creswell's (2013) "subjective evidence...based on individual views" (p.20). In such a qualitative research design, Creswell argues, the researcher is a key instrument in data collection, and hence empowers individuals, be it the researcher or subjects, to share their personal accounts and stories. In the current situated activity, the researcher intends to develop a theory if "partial or inadequate theories exist" ... or "existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem" (p. 48). The study at hand uses the qualitative research design in which a collection of poems composed by the author himself have been used in the analysis. The study is based on poetry as research in action (Hanauer, 2010). Such a poetic inquiry discusses poetry, from a personal lens, as a strategy to teaching English to learners of English whose first language is not English.

Materials

The study is based on subjective evidence assembled on the researcher's personal experience as a poet, teacher, and curriculum designer. Ten poems composed by the author were compiled and analyzed concerning vocabulary learning. The poems are short (do not exceed 240 words). They were written in light of Rachmatia (2015) and Proitsaki's (2019) criteria of poem selection for teaching purposes. On top of these criteria is the surface simplicity with potential depth, brevity, and modern forms of the target language (Jeffries, 1998) in addition to cultural sensitivity and localness of the teaching context.

Analysis and Discussion

The ten poems that were used in the analysis are relevant to main elements: readability, intelligibility, acculturation, language structure, and simplicity— elements that are always not taught directly in an implicit way nor governed by grammatical rules. These poems are discussed with reference to some poetic features in the literature. Among all the poems under investigation, some illustrative poetic lines and short poems have been incorporated to highlight some points in the analysis. To begin with, the poet could use even simple monosyllabic words to compose teachable poems. For example, in the poems *My Wish* and *What a Fashion!* include, words such as days, fish, what, get, wish, my, now, women, their, see, this, ten, zero, like, and the like.

My wish

These days, my daily dish
is void of meat and fish
Now, my dearest wish
is to get what I cherish!

What a Fashion!

Wise gentlemen and women
Don't like to see their children
Smitten by this kind of fashion
Which is zero out of ten.

In *My wish*, the verses are based on a personal experience. The poet sent these lines to his boss to release a due sum of money. The message of the poems is implicit rather than explicit. In *What a fashion!* however, the poet expresses his own attitude against the fashion of torn pants young people wear these days. Besides simplicity, the poems are written in such a descriptive language that is understandable and manageable even by students at the primary level.

In the following two poems, *Jobless* and *Parents*, the author describes a personal story of a person crawling to retirement, portraying that retirement is not the end of man's life. However, life goes on even after the working age period. This simple poem is self-explanatory where two wishes are expressed: finding a job opportunity and to remain residing in Tunisia. In *parents*, a sincere piece of advice is conveyed to children to be grateful to their parents who exerted lots of effort to bring them up and make them happy and successful adults.

Jobless

At the end of my rope
I'll never stop
looking for a job
In Tunisia not in Europe
That's my dearest hope.

Parents

Your parents have made ends meet
in order to stand on your feet
Thank them with every single heartbeat.

Apart from simple themes, the poet keeps his poems up-to-the-date in terms of the issues the poems about. The Coronavirus and monkey pox which broke out quite recently have been incorporated in one of the poems to make the theme of such poems up to date. It also embeds in the learners' awareness of what is going on around them. Like an ox, the tiny invisible virus hits its victims violently. Now that this pandemic is about to disappear, the secrets behind it (black box) are yet to be unrevealed as to its origin and the diabolic wrongdoers.

Coronavirus

Coronavirus was strong as an ox!
It went away with its black box!
Here we are now with monkey pox!
Are we still in a cruel hoax?

On the level of language, it is apparent that all the author's poems are characterized by a simple diction and an interesting style. Readers might find most of poems hilarious and rather easy to read. For instance, the poems, *Little Angels* and *Russia/Ukraine* illustrate how the poet manipulates his poetic abilities to teach certain vocabulary.

Little Angels

How nice to see and listen
to the angels of heaven!
The laughs of children
are much sweeter than
The music of Mozart and Beethoven

Russia/Ukraine

Nobody knows who will gain
The war between Russia and Ukraine!
Unanswered question on my brain:
Will the world be born again?

In *Little angels*, the words *listen* rhymes with *heaven*; *children* with *Beethoven*. Similarly, in *Russia/Ukraine*, the words *gain* and *brain* rhyme with one another and so do *Ukraine* and *brain*. It is not only the rhyme. There are some other aspects including the internal music woven by phrasing words. One more thing, the poems teach new words, e.g., *angles*, *mozart*, *Beethoven* which might be new words to some learners. Other examples include the names of countries – Russia and Ukraine. Also, learners can master the spelling of proper nouns such as *Russia* and *Ukraine*, *Beethoven* and *Mozart*. In *Russia/Ukraine*, the poet posits that the most common question about any war is: which party is likely to gain victory? The answer might be a simple one. But the most serious question is: will the whole world survive? Again, the poet uses poetry to promote critical thinking.

Putting the aspect of language in the previous literature, Çetinavcı and Tütünlü (2012) cited several examples to capitalize on simplicity. It would be useful to quote Williams' (1951) poem entitled, *This Is Just To Say*,

I have eaten
the plums
that were
in the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Acculturation can also be exhibited through teaching English through poems. The following two poems illustrate how a poet could use names from the local teaching context to draw the attention of his learners which might be more attractive than recalling names from other cultures. The name *Amal* and *Tunisian* in the poem entitled, *Amal* and *Hamood* in the poem entitled *Mr. Hammod* are two common names in the local context of the author. The author believes that starting such short poems with names from the

local situation would encourage the listeners, who happen to be English learners, to listen to the entire poems and imbibe acculturation in the learners. Also, weaving such cultural aspects with poetic and humorous mode make the poems not only vivid but also appealing.

Amal

The student Amal is number one
Learning for her is joy and fun
A unique Tunisian under the sun
A mother of one daughter and one son
Their duties are perfectly done.

Mr. Hamood

My friend Mr. Hamood
Was In his childhood
A noisy boy in the neighborhood
Now, because he eats
too much food
he is always in bad mood.

The poem, *Amal*, is based on a personal experience of teaching English to a unique female student. The poet expressed admiration for this lady, *Amal*, who enjoys learning English and makes much progress in addition to striking a balance between learning and home duties. Moreover, as a mother of two, she and her children do their jobs perfectly. In *Mr. Hamood*, there is a personal experience. Hamood, who used to be a noisy child, is now a good-hearted man regardless of his temporary bad mood, which might be attributed to his eating habits.

On a related note, the poet uses metaphor to demote names. In *Mr. Promise* below, *Mr. Promise* has been used humorously. It illustrates that *Mr. Promise* (who could be anybody who gives lots of promises and keeps none). This poem is based on a recent personal experience with a false friend who enjoys fixing promises and never keeps one of them. Although he tries to impress others, no one would trust him anymore. However, *Mr. Promise* will never change.

Mr. Promise

We all deny and dismiss
a single service by Mr. Promise
His (efforts) are more or less
A real swing and a miss
He still dares to blow a kiss
Until when Mr. Promise continues like this?

As displayed in the ten poems, the poems are based on imagination and personal experiences of the poet who happened to be a teacher of English. Each poem does not exceed five verses. It is the poet's belief that today's generation usually reads less than the twentieth-century generation. In poetry, even empty words and onomatopoeic are amusing to an intelligible hearer. It is this intelligibility that teachers should promote imbibe in their learners' characters. Rodríguez (2018) argued that "appropriate selection of poetry, according to learners' own English language level, without pressure and preconceptions, can result in an enriching content-based experience and in a meaningful communicative process, as learners discuss poetry based on responsible reading and enjoyment" (p. 375).

Simple and easy to handle, the poems provided in the study could be used as the first step to increase the learners' appetite to delve into the beauty of poetry and enjoy even long poems by great poets such as Shakespeare, John Donne, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, and the list goes on. Literary appreciation and taste for poetry are what students need to enrich their EFL learning. Based on the argument of this paper, the poems discussed are true if the learners are at the beginner level. These are at best glorified rhymes for adults, yet this needs to be examined in further research with some other levels and other contexts. For those who want to grow as poets and poetry teachers, Hunter (2020), among other books, is an excellent guide to writing poetry for various learners' levels. It also helps poem composers decide what to write, to whom, and how to craft that.

Conclusion

This study seeks to clarify the significance of integrating literature into learning and teaching English as a second or foreign language with a prime concern on vocabulary enhancement in the target language syllabus and course description because vocabulary is a central component of language. Through this paper, the author reflects on his own poetic attempts, illustrating that the poems, though simple, could be used to teach language at any level for promoting certain aspects of the target language. The study is limited to a bunch of single-authored short poems, taught by the author himself, which might cast a drawback of the study in terms of subjectivity. The researcher examined the phenomenon from within being the examiner and poet teacher, narrating his personal experience with poetry composition and using it in teaching English. However, the essence of the study is to imply that poetry is no longer a phobia; it should be approached in such a way that makes it amusing and motivating. That is, evidence is shaped by the researcher's own experience. It would be even enhanced by adding evidence from without – surveying the learners' perceptions about the poems taught. Other researchers may examine the effects of the poems used in the present inquiry or some other simple poems to provide more evidence on the effect of teaching poetry on learners' performance in terms of vocabulary or any other aspect of the language.

Disclosure Statement:

I (the author of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

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