

Conference Paper

Making their Voices Heard: Introducing the Joy of Poetry Writing in Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

The use of poetry in the classroom is not an uncommon phenomenon in foreign language teaching. Many teachers believe that poetry writing can help students improve their language fluency and provide meaningful literacy. However, some language teachers are quite skeptical of the idea, by referring to the fact that students' limited linguistic resources will prevent them from performing the challenging task. This paper tries to show how poetry writing can be applied in EFL classroom, not only as a means to develop students' language competence, but also as a medium to create meaningful dialogue among students. Previously designed as an additional activity in a formal academic writing class, the poetry writing has become one of the favorite sections in the students' activities. By adding small but interesting features to the technique, poetry writing can in fact turn into an activity many students look forward to. During the process, the students are engaged in a meaningful exchange with their fellow learners, with language learning also happens along the way, sometimes quite unconsciously. Such process may help students to appreciate various forms of literary work, to improve the language fluency, and most importantly, to provide a sense of audience to students who want to make their voices heard.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Poetic Function of Language in Jakobson's Framework

Discussing Jakobson's poetic function of language has never been this challenging: with all the complexities of modern world, the increasingly fast pace of life and the popularity of instant culture, do we still have the time to sit quietly in the tranquility of the nature, weaving all the words and phrases into a good poem that will touch the heart of many readers? And can we, as readers, appreciate the beauty of those lines the way our previous generation did?

While poetry is not the only manifestation of the poetic function of language [3], it is obvious that poetry provides the richest instances of the beauty (and the complexity) of verbal art. It is therefore not surprising when poetry is also perceived as the most

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creative use of language. This essay will attempt to discuss poetry, especially in relation to its possibility as a tool for language learning.

There are at least three reasons why poetry is interesting to discuss. The first reason is related to the definition of poetry itself. When can we label something as “a poem” and the others as “a collection of ordinary sentences”? Second, it is quite obvious that today, poetry is much less popular than any other literary work. The last reason is the fact that teachers seem to avoid the use of poetry in their classroom, possibly because of the wrong assumption about poetry or the lack of knowledge on how to actually use this work of art for their teaching.

1.2. Poetry: The Most Creative Use of Language?

The claim made by Jakobson which says that the most creative use of language can be found in poetry is very interesting, since one can analyze the statement internally and externally. Internal analysis deals with the definition of “poetry” that we have. External analysis, on the hand, has something to do with the position of poetry in relation to other forms of literary works. The strengths as well as the weaknesses of the view that poetry is the most creative use of language are derived from this different point of analysis.

Encarta Dictionary defines poetry as “literary works written in verse, in particular the verse with high quality, great beauty, emotional sincerity or intensity, or profound insight”. By such definition, it should be clear why only those who have advanced level of linguistic competence are capable of creating a good poem. A good poet is someone who is good at creating fresh metaphor, choosing the right words to represent the right expression, and moving skillfully and creatively at all linguistic levels. Therefore, the claim that it is in poetry that one can find the most creative use of language is undeniably true.

Interestingly, the different definition of poetry proposed by different people has become the source of the “weaknesses” of such claim. Brindley (1980, in [1]) nicely presents the debate on this matter by comparing two different definitions that finally lead to different attitudes towards poetry and later towards the use of poetry in EFL classroom. On the one hand, poems are often perceived as having geographical or social settings alien to the students’ experience. From this perspective, the greatest barrier to understanding poetry is therefore its elliptical, metaphorical, and highly allusive language, a combination that makes poetry “has little to offer the EFL classroom”. On the other hand, there is also another definition of poetry which is much broader than the previous, that “a poem is a piece of writing in which the words are chosen for their beauty and sound and are carefully arranged, often in short lines which rhyme” (Collins, 2001). Using this definition, a simple nursery rhyme consisting of a few lines

about something totally nonsense can also be called “poetry”. The different definition therefore leads to the question regarding whether or not someone is being “creative” when s/he is writing his/her own “version” of poetry.

The next “weakness” of the claim that the most sophisticated and creative use of language is the one found in poetry can also be challenged by the fact that other forms of literary works, for example prose, requires nothing less than equal level of creativity from the part of the author. As with all works of arts, we are also aware that there are good poems and bad poems, good novels and bad ones. In addition, the fact that poetic function of language is also present in other literary genres makes it almost impossible for us to claim that poetry is the work of verbal art which displays the highest level of linguistic creativity.

1.3. The Use of Poetry in EFL Classroom

In [2] believes that involving poems in EFL classroom might bring about some benefits for the students. When studying poems by components, for example, students can learn to appreciate the writer’s composition process. Poems are also good to help students develop their sensitivity for words, a skill that may later lead into a deeper interest on language and better analytical competence. Given sufficient exposure to quality poems, the students might in turn develop an ability to produce their own piece of poems.

My experience with poetry in the EFL classroom was more of an incident than a planned lesson. One day, I asked my students in the Writing Class to write a poem in their journal book to be commented by a friend from a different class. Journal book is a special book containing students’ personal writings on various topics. The entries students wrote in their journal book would be responded by either the lecturer or their friends in terms of the contents. However, it would not be checked in terms of the grammar: the journal is merely used as a tool to improve students’ fluency. To add to the fun of the “no-grammar-correction” rule for the journal book, last year I asked all students to invent an English name instead of their real name to be displayed in the journal book. I was the only person who had the record of who’s who.

The idea to ask the students to write a poem as one of the journal entries came quite spontaneously, without an awareness of the existence of the so-called poetic function of language that needs to be introduced to the students. I just felt that students need to be exposed to many different forms of written language so that they have enough confidence in using different languages for different purposes. For poem in particular, I think this is an area rarely touched in the teaching of writing. It is an unfortunate fact that these days, it is hard to find people who can appreciate poems. Modern people seem to see poems as the product of “oversensitivity” or even “oversentimentality”

towards the harsh world. Like instant food that has replaced home-made cooking, the deep, beautiful words in poetry have been replaced by plain, simple and to-the-point statement, something that does not take too much time to decipher. The fast pace of life in modern world has taken its toll.

Their immediate response to the assignment was an "Oh no... I can't write a poem." However what I got from their facial expressions -especially the boys- were more like as if they were saying "A poem? But I'm not that sentimental, fragile, flamboyant, or hyperbolic kind of person!"

When I got the journal submitted the following week, I was quite surprised to find out some really good lines they created. Among some stolen lines from the internet and a couple of familiar poems about teenage love, I found some poems that attracted my attention.

Below is one of the student's poems which were successful in catching my attention. The Poem was written by "Alexander" (a pseudonym)

The Best and the Worst

A common frame on the night

Standing alone all along

Full of chain ensnared around

And drives her into a maze

Waiting for a good boy, good boys

Just surviving for another dime

"Is it okay to serve yours?"

Yes, nothing can be worthy

Money, a lot of money

They said, "She grasps a life with a rotten palm,

"Through a ditch with a broken maze"

She hears and is still alive

Try to break a riddle of life

She doesn't let her breath fall into the blackest hole

Yet, thinking to blend the black and white of all

A comment by Alice (another pseudonym, a female student from a different class)

Hi Alexander,

Your poem is so beautiful. It's hard to decipher the meaning inside. Lemme try with this:

*A good girl lost in a dark maze
Forced to be there with no other choice
She's too poor to get out
Too weak to get away
Yet, she's too white to be in that black maze
In the middle of her confusion
She's thinking of mixing her whiteness and the blackness of that maze*

I don't think it's a good idea to mix black and white, because it will end up in gray. Being gray has never been good I think. Gray is for someone who's not sure about his/her true identity. Gray is for someone who can't choose to be in the right or left. Gray is for someone who tries to be in the middle just because s/he is too afraid to take the risk of choosing one side.

Hey, I'm still not so sure about my interpretation of your poem though... I think there is one word that can best symbolize that girl. I'm not so sure though. This subject is quite sensitive. I don't think I can write that word, that's too risky...

A week later, Alexander replied:

I think your analysis is quite deep, but there are some meanings that you missed.

I said "she grasps a life with rotten palm, through a ditch with the broken maze" to symbolize how bad "they" blame her for her "job". But "they" don't know how difficult her life is. And "they" don't care. Amazingly, she faces the blame wisely, and still walks to break the worst thing to be the worthy one. "She doesn't let her breath fall", she doesn't give up but she faces this condition by seeing the black and the white side of her life. But I used the word "blend" in my poem. It means people cannot judge only from the black side, but they must consider the other side wisely.

Those sentences above are maybe enough to interpret my poem. I guess you will say "whore", right? That's what I mean when describing "the girl"

It is quite amazing to follow the "conversation" in the students' dialogue journal. Considering the fact that the students in that class had just finished their first semester, the poem was way beyond my expectation. Alexander's choice of words was brave and bold –and sometimes vulgar- and the topic was also quite deep though not unusual. What surprised me the most was the fact that "Alexander" was struggling in his Paragraph Writing course. He had a problem in organizing his ideas and following the logical order. Reading his poem gave me a chance to see him from a different point of view. Knowing that somebody like "Alexander" was capable of creating the

poem has left me thinking that some people might be born with that “artistic” sense, while others might be capable of writing a piece of scientific article but in a dull, boring language.

(I’ve tried to *google* the poem for possible case of plagiarism, but so far there has been no proof that the poem had been taken from somewhere else. While such possibility remains an issue that should not hinder language teachers to provide students with the opportunity to play with the language in a meaningful way)

2. Conclusions and Suggestions

Using the right method and approach, poetry writing (and poetry “reading”, or analysis) can be made fun and challenging for EFL students. The presence of the “mystery reader” in the dialogue journal approach has proven effective to help students express themselves in poetry. Students were challenged to write to the best of their ability since they are aware that their work will be read and commented by some real audience (there was one student who seemed to be quite embarrassed when her reader found out that the “poem” she wrote was taken from a song). Meanwhile, the anonymity will greatly help the more shy writers to do their task without feeling intimidated.

Introducing poetic function of language to the EFL learners can also help them to be better equipped in terms of their linguistic style. This can be achieved by involving both reading and writing poetry, since each supports the other. Reading poetry, especially those written by native speakers, will help learner to get the “right” sense of the advanced and sophisticated language. Imitating the way native speaker play with words in poetry is one step a learner need to do before they are able to produce their own piece of writings.

Finally, separating the discussion between “poetic function of language” and “poetry” is also necessary as to avoid the confusion and unnecessary debate. While the domain of poetics is relatively clear, the definition of “poetry” is somehow debatable, though one might safely assume that the element of poetics –no matter how small– should be present in a verse before we can call it “a poem”.

References

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